# Futures of Research-Practice Partnerships in Education

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**Introduction**

UNESCO's *Learning to Become* renewed vision of education for 2050 centers the role of teachers as experts and key role players in driving the transformation of education (UNESCO, 2021). The pandemic has highlighted the capacity of educators to pivot quickly, creatively and autonomously in response to student needs and rapidly evolving conditions.  As we move forward, we might consider how the experience and expertise of educators should be drawn upon and nurtured as we imagine, "what teaching and teachers are, and what we would like them, us, to become" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 10). However, teachers' work has become increasingly demanding in response to emerging technologies, pedagogies and continued social inequities (UNESCO, 2021).   Ensuring high quality, equitable and inclusive educational experiences for all students will require attention to systemic supports to develop responsive pedagogy, policy, procedures and practice.  Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) offer one possible lever for cultivating just and equitable futures for public education in the short and long term. RPPs present an opportunity for bolstering the professional capital of teachers and creating a collaborative space for futures thinking in response to the pandemic as well as long standing inequities in education.
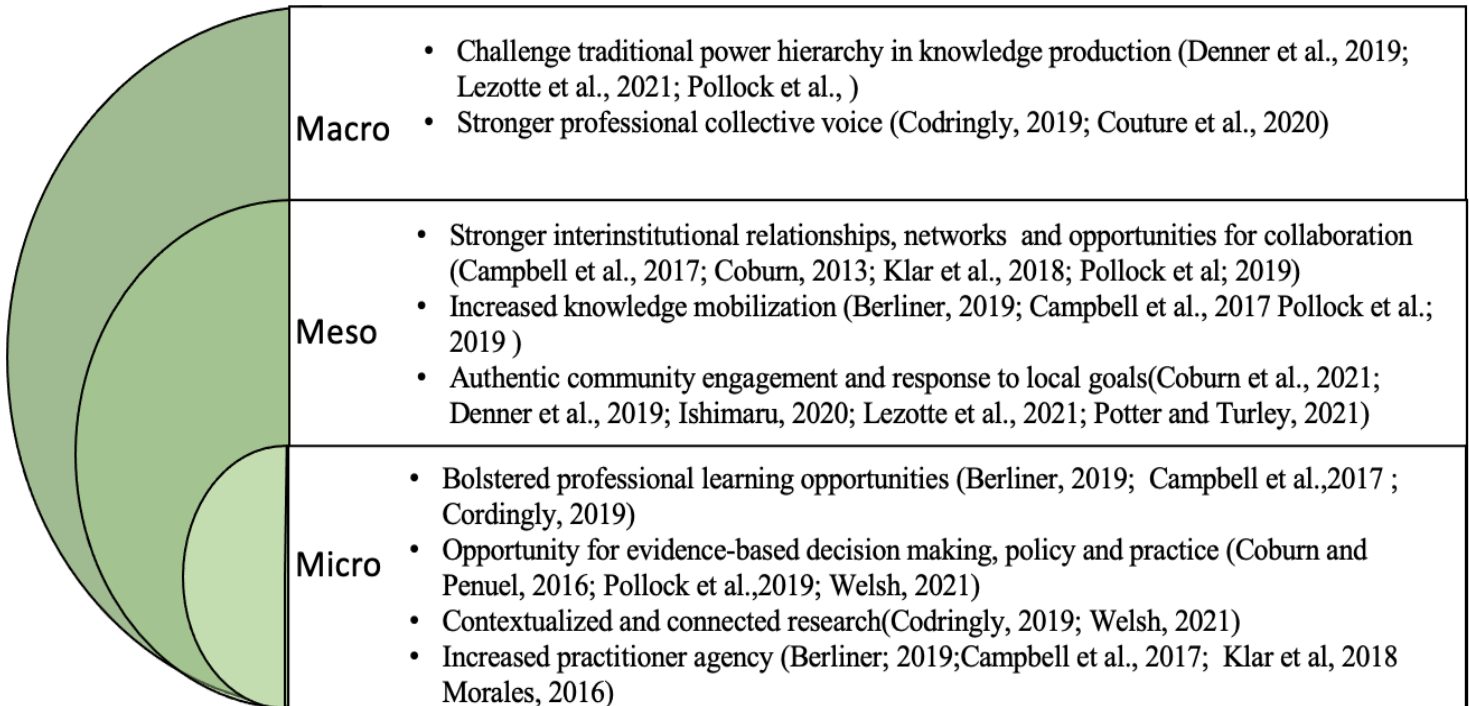
The pandemic has emphasized many of the societal inequities already perpetuated through the education system that marginalize and disadvantage students based on identity indicators including but not limited to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and first language (Gallagher et al., 2021; Pier et al., 2021).  In Ontario, Canada, public education is internationally recognized as a high performing system (NCEE, 2016), yet student experiences and outcomes are still inequitable (Campbell, 2020; Shah, 2018), and the instability in schooling during the pandemic can be seen to have exacerbated these inequities (Gallagher et al., 2021).  As we return to school, our profession is compelled to critically consider how a 'return to normal'—normal curriculum, normal metrics, normal pedagogy, and normal

relationships— contributes to more of the same for underserved communities (Azorin, 2020). Decisions on what might become in education cannot be made in small rooms, and instead must invite consultation and collaboration from various stakeholders including families, teachers and researchers. In this paper, the futures of RPPs as collaborative spaces for collective and critical inquiry are explored as a means for understanding and clarifying the present needs of local communities, as well as their desired futures through education.

## Research Practice Partnerships

In education, RPPs typically exist at the imagined boundaries between the academy and k-12 schools, though they may also include external organizations based on stakeholders and research interests. RPPs attempt to bridge the longstanding divide between theory and practice by, "having researchers and practitioners take joint ownership of research that addresses problems of practice (Lezotte, 2021, p.2) through collaborative inquiry. Coburn et al. (2013) define these RPPs at the school district level as, "long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcome" (p.2). RPPs vary in degree of collaboration, assumed roles for researcher and practitioners, research scope and process. They have been used to support professional development for teachers (Campbell et al., 2018), to pursue local region goals (Coburn, 2013), and to mobilize knowledge between research, practice and community (Ishimaru, 2020; Pollock et al. 2019).

As both funding and interest in evidence-based practice and policy has increased so too has the popularity of RPPs (Coburn and Perneal 2016 p. 49; Coburn et al., 2021; Pollock et al, 2017; Welsh, 2021). The literature on RPPs highlights the many potential benefits they offer the education system as a whole. These are depicted in *figure 1*.

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| **Macro** | • Challenge traditional power hierarchy in knowledge production (Denner et al., 2019; Lezotte et al., 2021; Pollock et al., )<br>• Stronger professional collective voice (Codringly, 2019; Couture et al., 2020) |
| **Meso** | • Stronger interinstitutional relationships, networks and opportunities for collaboration (Campbell et al., 2017; Coburn, 2013; Klar et al., 2018; Pollock et al; 2019)<br>• Increased knowledge mobilization (Berliner, 2019; Campbell et al., 2017 Pollock et al.; 2019 )<br>• Authentic community engagement and response to local goals(Coburn et al., 2021; Denner et al., 2019; Ishimaru, 2020; Lezotte et al., 2021; Potter and Turley, 2021) |
| **Micro** | • Bolstered professional learning opportunities (Berliner, 2019; Campbell et al.,2017 ; Cordingly, 2019)<br>• Opportunity for evidence-based decision making, policy and practice (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Pollock et al.,2019; Welsh, 2021)<br>• Contextualized and connected research(Codringly, 2019; Welsh, 2021)<br>• Increased practitioner agency (Berliner; 2019;Campbell et al., 2017; Klar et al, 2018 Morales, 2016) |

While there are many possible benefits of RPPs, in practice they are challenging to enact as both structural and cultural aspects of the partnership are fraught with tension and obstacles. Structurally, issues of funding, institutional incentives, resources, time, scheduling and personnel turnover challenge sustained productive RPPs (Berliner, 2019; Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Codringly, 2019; Couture et al., 2020; Klar et al. 2018; Lezotte, 2021; Welsh, 2021). Beyond these technical obstacles lie deeper cultural conflicts between research and practice that have culminated in strained relationship and mistrust (Farell et al., 2019; Lezotte, 2021). These conflicts emerge from a lack of shared language, experience and interinstitutional norms for collaboration (Coburn et al., 2021; Cordingly, 2019; Welsh, 2021), as well as perceived relational hierarchy that positions researchers as outsider experts and practitioners as receiving labourers (Denner, 2019).
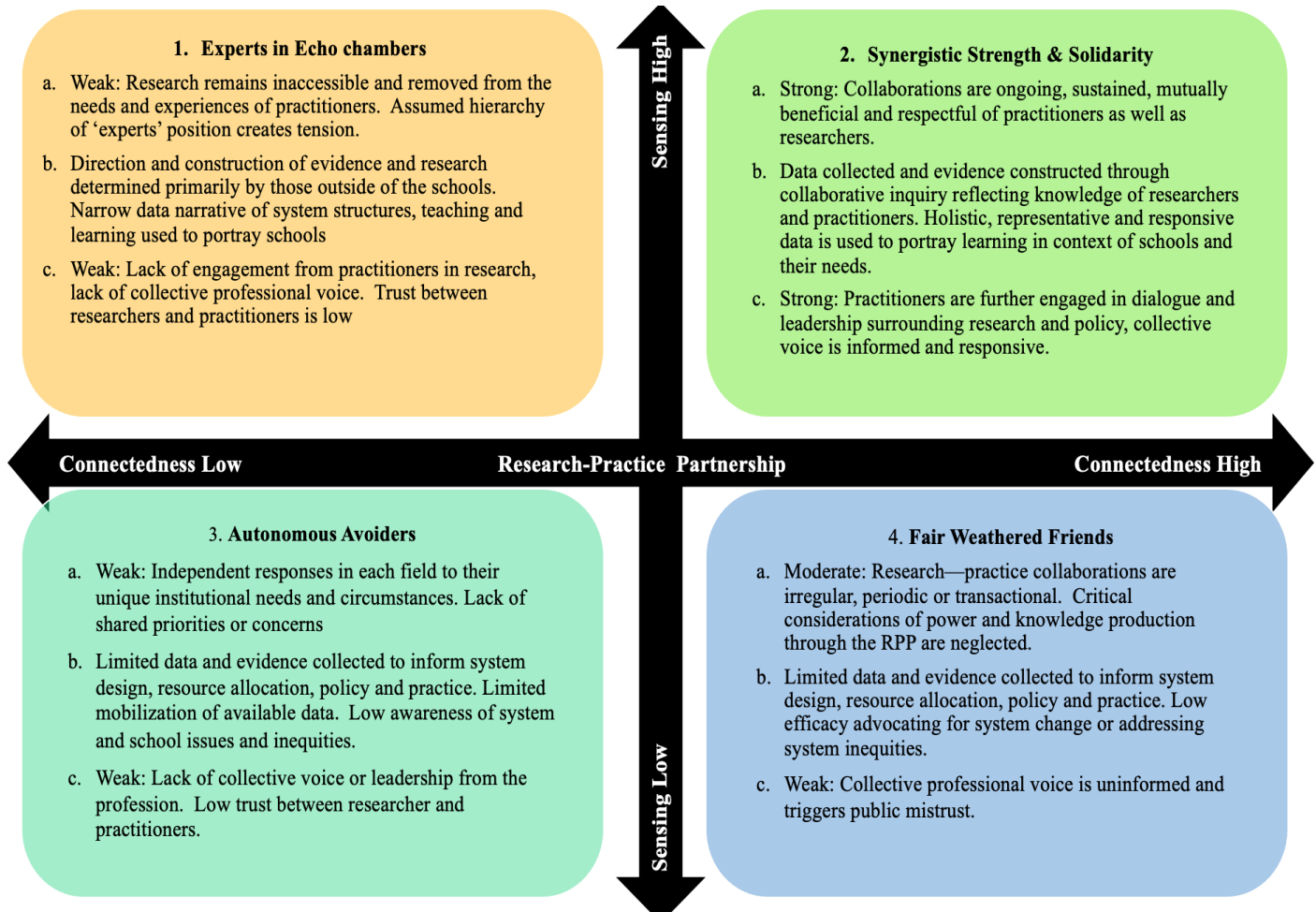
As these tensions are navigated between the two communities, the education system as a whole remains susceptible to external pressures, measures and political jockeying that threaten the health of the profession, and quality of education in our schools. Learning loss has become a driving litany used

to describe the impacts of the pandemic on students (McKinney de Royston and Vossoughi, 2020; Strauss, 2020; Zhao, 2021), and the prominence of this limited narrative has considerable negative implications for the futures of schooling. Zhao (2021) describes how such tunnel vision might lead to a positivist doubling down on data collection, pedagogy, policy and funding targeting academic achievement and testing as oppose to other desired outcomes and conditions for equitable and quality education. Developing the futures of RPPs quickly and effectively might offer an opportunity for collective voice from within the field to expand the narrative on educational outcomes and bring focus to local needs, and goals for education.

### Bratton Model Scenarios for RPPs

The Bratton Model adapted as a foresight tool in our course (Bratton, 2020), was used to construct four possible scenarios for RPPs based on the intersection of two trajectories: a continuums of connectedness and the degree of the capacity for 'sensing' between research and practice communities. Sensing, in this application of the Bratton Model, refers to what is valued, measured and communicated as evidence of educational quality. Connectedness refers to the extent that 'us'(practitioners) and 'them'(researchers) are mutually invested and interconnected in the pursuit of 'it' (equitable and high-quality education). In each scenario, the combined outcomes of connectedness and sensing are examined through their influence on:

   a. Interinstitutional relationships and collaboration

   b. Construction and use of evidence and data

   c. Collective professional strength

**1. Experts in Echo chambers**

a. Weak: Research remains inaccessible and removed from the needs and experiences of practitioners. Assumed hierarchy of 'experts' position creates tension.

b. Direction and construction of evidence and research determined primarily by those outside of the schools. Narrow data narrative of system structures, teaching and learning used to portray schools

c. Weak: Lack of engagement from practitioners in research, lack of collective professional voice. Trust between researchers and practitioners is low

**2. Synergistic Strength & Solidarity**

a. Strong: Collaborations are ongoing, sustained, mutually beneficial and respectful of practitioners as well as researchers.

b. Data collected and evidence constructed through collaborative inquiry reflecting knowledge of researchers and practitioners. Holistic, representative and responsive data is used to portray learning in context of schools and their needs.

c. Strong: Practitioners are further engaged in dialogue and leadership surrounding research and policy, collective voice is informed and responsive.

**Sensing High** | **Sensing Low**

**Connectedness Low** — Research-Practice Partnership — **Connectedness High**

**3. Autonomous Avoiders**

a. Weak: Independent responses in each field to their unique institutional needs and circumstances. Lack of shared priorities or concerns

b. Limited data and evidence collected to inform system design, resource allocation, policy and practice. Limited mobilization of available data. Low awareness of system and school issues and inequities.

c. Weak: Lack of collective voice or leadership from the profession. Low trust between researcher and practitioners.

**4. Fair Weathered Friends**

a. Moderate: Research—practice collaborations are irregular, periodic or transactional. Critical considerations of power and knowledge production through the RPP are neglected.

b. Limited data and evidence collected to inform system design, resource allocation, policy and practice. Low efficacy advocating for system change or addressing system inequities.

c. Weak: Collective professional voice is uninformed and triggers public mistrust.

## Preferred Futures for RPPs: High Connectedness/ High Sensing

Drawing on *Scenario 2: Synergistic Strength and Solidarity*, a preferred future for RPPs might see them become a normalized feature in our school settings as a space for dialogical construction of pedagogy and policy in response to local context and a full range of evidence honouring both theory and practice. However, as stated previously, there are a number of internal structural and cultural obstacles, as well as external pressures that make the realization of this future less probable. In projecting toward the preferred scenario, we might look to past examples of successful RPPs and practices that can support healthy collaborations.

Within Ontario's education landscape, a multitude of RPPs have been used to strengthen professional networks, collaboration and knowledge mobilization (KMb) between varying

combinations of researchers, practitioners, communities and the government. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the wealth of the RPP landscape, two particular examples are analyzed for elements that would support a high-connected and high-sensing future scenario. In 2007, the Teacher Learning and Leadership Project (TLLP) was initiated and supported through the Ontario Teacher Federation (OTF) and the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME). Goals of the initiative were centered on teacher learning, leadership, collaboration and knowledge sharing in support of provincial goals for equity, wellbeing, and excellence in education (Campbell et al. 2017a, 2018). Support for the teacher-led projects was provided through structural elements including funding, release time, networking opportunities and training, as well as cultural elements that supported the development of professional capital (Campbell et al., 2018). Within this collaboration, researchers took on new roles as facilitators of teacher-led projects, and teachers were able to take ownership of provincial stated goals and their own professional development in alignment with these goals.

The Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER) was initiated in 2010 through a collaboration between two universities and the OME with goals to capitalize on the "middle tier of a research informed ecosystem" in efforts to support knowledge mobilization, evidence use, networking and a wide range of RPPs (Pollock et al., 2019,p. 22). This initiative experienced ten years of success with a wide range of outputs including presentations, lessons, videos, workshops and web repositories intended to mobilize knowledge (Campbell et al., 2017b). Coordination of networks and projects through the KNAER required strong structural support including personnel for leadership and committee work, funding for projects and information-communication technology. Existing structures and networks were also used to enhance mobilization and partnerships in the KNAER. The culture within the KNAER emphasized KMb as more than unilateral dissemination of research into practice,

instead stressing opportunities collaborative partnerships and opportunities for cocreation of evidence (Pollock et al., 2019).

While the TLLP and the KNAER are distinct in focus, they highlight key common elements for both structural and cultural support of future RPPs.  First, they were widely networked —laterally across regions and vertically through school boards, universities and provincial government.  Secondly, each of these initiatives challenged traditional hierarchical notions of knowledge production and expertise in education through a valuing of practitioner experience, genuine collaboration and co-creation of evidence with researchers.  Finally, and perhaps most significant was the synergy of both structural and cultural elements that allowed for development of dialogical constructive spaces.  Over the last decade, the RPP landscape in Ontario education has remained lively and exists as a resource to help guide the future of partnerships in education.

**A Thing from the Future: RPPs for Equitable Collaborative Inquiries**

A *Thing from the Future*, adapted from Candy (2010, p. 13),  is used as a foresight tool to create a preferred future narrative for RPPs in education that builds upon the past, addresses concerns in present context, and creates opportunities for the evolution in the future.  This *Thing From the Future* capitalizes on current opportunities to examine schooling through partnerships that engage stakeholders and sustain alliances for educational advocacy and equitable change.

| Arc | **Growth, Discipline, Transformation** |
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|     | <ul><li>**Growth:** Initiating in the near future and extending in the long term, RPPs build upon the lessons learned from Ontario's past examples to support partnerships that are authentically collaborative and address the needs of local schools and districts toward goals of equity and inclusion.  Existing networks and interested parties offer a starting point for consult and foundation for future RPPs.</li><li>**Discipline:** Discipline would be required to coordinate partnership, ensuring they are not contrived or used as a top-down directive and checkbox.</li></ul> |

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| | • **Transformation:** Transformation of relationships and power dynamics will be required to create a collaborative culture that honours a diversity of stakeholders and experiences. |
| **Terrain** | **Critical Democracy in School Based Collaborative Research**<br><br>• **Critical Engagement:** Following the pandemic, questions about purpose and quality in schooling have been raised by those in education as well as the public (Zhao, 2021).  There is also a renewed sense of solidarity with the public and faith in teaching (Azorin, 2020; UNESO, 2021).  This presents the opportunity for teachers to challenge the technocratic, instrumental ideology in education that limits teacher autonomy and position teachers as deskilled workers.  Following the pandemic, teachers might assert themselves as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 2018) with particular first-hand knowledge on current issues in education and opportunities for the future. Within this professional landscape, the preferred future for RPPs bring together teachers and researchers and families to consider learnings, concerns and hopes following the pandemic and looking to the future for quality in schooling.  Nondominant families should be centered in these conversations to challenge the status quo.<br>• **New Spaces for Co-construction:** RPPs become a creative, collaborative and critically reflective spaces for both teacher and researchers to inform change in education moving into the future. The disruptive digital landscape (Lingard et al., 2021) also provides us with new considerations on how knowledge might be shared, and how dialogues might be continued to sustain networks across institutions. |
| **Object** | **Equity Focused RPPs for Pandemic Recovery and Futures Planning**<br><br>Ensuring success in the futures of RPPs will require structure and cultural changes to support authentic collaboration, as well as responsiveness to local communities and schools.<br><br>**Structural Changes:**<br>• **Incentive and Training:** Within universities and schools, changes to incentive structures and professional learning for researchers and practitioners would provide support for navigating new terrain in RPPs (Lezotte, 2021; Welsh, 2021)<br>• **Resources and Roles:** Securing resources including hiring of dedicated personnel for leadership and coordination of RPPs would be beneficial for success (Pollock et al., 2019).  These individuals or committees might follow the example from the KNAER and draw upon researchers from university faculties and/or school boards.  This might also elicit new roles for teacher leadership as well as pracademics (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020) who are experienced in traversing both worlds.  Other supporting structures might include the construction of a tech-enabled networking system for sharing knowledge and collaborating.<br>• **Methods and Metrics:** Changes would also be required to shift metrics, research focus and methods to suit the needs and interests of local communities.  Following Zhao's (2019) collaborative approach to wicked problems, stakeholder meetings that engage families, students, teachers and parents would make possible a shift in the articulation of quality education.  These would be facilitated and organized |

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| | through effective and purposeful meetings that would need to take into account authentic engagement and open discussion (Klar et al., 2018).<br><br>**Cognitive Changes**<br>• **Trust, Power and Relationships:** New cultural norms for collaboration that address expectations, roles, trust and relational accountability need to be established to ensure these future RPPs for equity are equitable in their process. These norms should be informed by critical theory that allows all parties involved to examine how underlying issues of power, privilege and politics influence positionality, relationships and the experience of nondominant families in schooling (Denner, 2019; Ishimaru, 2020; Lezotte, 2021). A shift in relationship will also require consideration of how social capital and decision-making capital is experienced and built through these RPPs. This means further engaging teachers as well families and students who are typically left out of ideological discussions and policy driving evidence collection and interpretation (Ishimaru,2020; Zhao, 2019). |
| **Mood** | **Tentative Energy**<br>• **Tentative:** A history of mistrust and neglect will likely result in some hesitancy to engage in authentic collaborations by all parties. Discomfort will also likely accompany the move toward RPPs that redistribute social and decisional capital and a critical lens on relationships. An adjustment phase will be required to establish the new culture with new roles, relationships and learning about each other.<br><br>• **Energized:** There is also likely to be a strong energy and willingness to engage in deeper conversations about inequities, lessons from the pandemic, work conditions and opportunities for building back better (Azorin, 2020; Zhao, 2021). Renewed energy might spark and sustain collaborations, even when uneasy or challenging. Practitioners might feel an increased sense of efficacy and professional capital with the opportunity to engage deeply in problems of practice and directing of new possibilities. Parents, student and communities might feel a sense of hopeful agency as RPPs ask them about their experiences, their goals and hopes for education. Researchers might feel more connected to their work and the profession. They might feel a renewed sense of curiosity and wholeness as human impacts and relationships become normative aspects of their work. |

## Conclusion

UNESCO's *Futures of Education Initiative* invites us to imagine what education might become during

a time of profound change and uncertainty (UNESCO, 2020). As we enter into a post-pandemic era,

this initiative challenges us to actively engage in the design of imagined futures through a critical

reflection on the past and present, and an illuminating of values we hope to ground our preferred futures.

While the pandemic has strained education systems it has also made clear the issues we must address if we are to move toward a more just and equitable future. The future of RPPs detailed here might act as a key component for addressing these issues and ensuring responsiveness to challenges in the future (Azorin, 2020). The futures of RPPs described in this paper offer an opportunity to build sustained relationships and alliance that:

> take advantage of the potential of futuring exercises – that is, imagining the futures of teaching – as a fruitful policy strategy to open up public conversations about the expectations and realities of teaching, including not only current anxieties and fears but also sources of hope and transformation
>
> UNESCO, 2021, p.4

Envisioning preferred and just and equitable futures for education will require the challenging of past and present deficit-based systemic norms in schooling and the creation of new narratives for equity and inclusion that draw upon the strengths, needs and experiences of local communities within this global context. It will require a re-imagining of relationships, and collective professional voice that might challenge the status quo and create powerful constructive spaces that are grounded in a shared commitment to a humanistic vision of education, meant to better understand, serve and honour all students.

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