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## L'alliance université-milieus de pratique au service du bien-être *et de la réussite éducative en contexte de diversité*

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# What have we learned from the COVID-19 global pandemic about school principals and the inclusion of students with special education needs ?



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Supporting students with special education needs through the pandemic has brought specific challenges which principals have had to address. Through interviews and surveys, Ontario principals described experiences with supporting students with special education needs and identified resources during the COVID-19 pandemic while identifying ways they have confronted these challenges. We report on three key lessons for school leaders who support inclusive schools : the importance of an ecological approach, professional learning needs to include both technical and values aspects, and the need to talk more about the mental health of principals. The article provides considerations for principals and system leaders in the post-pandemic era.

School districts across Canada, like many around the world, were dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. By mid-March 2020, most schools across Canada were closed and system leaders, school principals, and teachers were forced to implement emergency remote instruction. The educational experiences during the past year, from initial school closures to emergency remote instruction to the current variety of remote, virtual, asynchronous and synchronous, and in-person models across Canada, provides a significant opportunity to consider how school systems have engaged with students with special education needs (SEN). This paper specifically examines the question, “What experiences and lessons learned did school principals in Ontario identify for supporting students with special education needs during the pandemic?”

Despite the significant amount of literature that has explored inclusion for students with SEN, there is limited literature that has examined how school principals foster inclusive schools that support students with SEN. Our research team has been working to fill this gap over the past ten years. We have completed, or are in the midst of, studies that have included school principals from multiple jurisdictions in Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador). Key findings from these studies have been reported elsewhere (e.g., Sider, 2020 ; Sider et al., 2017). A key aspect of these studies has been the identification of critical incidents, which are significant positive or negative experiences that school principals have had with students with SEN, and how these influence leadership practices (Sider, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic “interrupted” these studies but provided us with a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of principals in the midst of a global pandemic and how the pandemic influenced how they were supporting students with SEN. Here we report on data from two studies, one involving interviews with 21 principals in Ontario and the other which was a questionnaire that 82 principals from across Ontario completed. Both studies were completed between May-October 2020. Here we report on three key findings which illustrate lessons learned from the pandemic on how principals can effectively support students with SEN. These findings include ensuring an ecological approach, framing professional learning for principals to include both technical and values aspects, and addressing the mental health needs of principals.

## Lesson 1: *The importance of an ecological approach*

An ecological approach to education considers the full range of needs – and available supports – for students and their families. Early in the pandemic, many principals realized that students with SEN were at risk for being marginalized from the supports they required. Students with SEN often require significant supports such as specialized technology, human resources, and individualized programming. When schools closed, most of these supports were immediately unavailable for students. One principal described the challenges of emergency remote learning as “How to meet their [students with SEN] unique needs without some of the environment, schedule, transitions, equipment, and relationships that support daily learning.”

As schools started delivering emergency remote instruction, available supports were limited. For example, students with dedicated support workers were unable to access them in face-to-face settings. Principals described working with families and educational workers to provide the necessary supports as quickly as possible. One principal commented that, despite best intentions and efforts, “the marginalization of our families with kids with special needs was incredible.” Principals also recognized that their support of families needed to involve more than just providing devices and instructional tools since many were also struggling financially and socio-emotionally. One principal stated, “During the pandemic, I was delivering computers [and] internet devices but most importantly, food boxes to some of our families.”

Principals also discussed their increasing awareness of the necessity of involving parents and guardians in educational programming as part of this ecological approach. One principal stated, “I think the biggest thing I’ve learned is how important parents are as partners. I think I have paid lip service to that in the past. I don’t think until this happened, I ever realized how important that relationship is.” Although parent engagement has been a focus of school systems for some time, the pandemic required that families be more significantly involved in the educational experience of their children since they were often delivering, or supervising, instruction. Increased levels of connectivity with the community, parents, staff, and students are key aspects of leadership during the pandemic (Planche & Erdmann, 2021). A principal noted the focus on families, particularly early in emergency remote learning: “That’s what we have really focused on, how can we support our families in particular with families who have children with special needs.”

The importance of an ecological approach, engaging the full educational and family community in supporting students with SEN, was noted by principals. The vast majority of principals in our studies indicated that the most significant strategy they and their staff used in this process was daily or weekly phone contact with students and their families. Principals discussed meeting with teachers and support staff to problem-solve specific situations where students required intensive supports. Principals often engaged in the delivery of educational programming in an effort to provide support to students with SEN. For example, principals described making frequent phone calls to students and their parents, delivering equipment to students' homes, meeting with students on video-conferencing technology to provide instructional support, and being available to support parents who were experiencing significant stress at home. One principal summarized this ecological support of families as, "Communicate and assess the needs, provide supports where you can, listen, adjust and repeat."

## *Lesson 2 : Professional learning needs to include both technical and values aspects*

The training that educators experience in their preparation to be school principals often focuses on the technical and legal aspects of the principalship along with their role as instructional leaders. Principal preparation programs in Ontario are limited to an overview of legal responsibilities and general programs for students with SEN. Their training includes, for example, knowing the regulations that govern education, developing skills in human resource management, and supervising curriculum implementation. In Ontario, the Ontario Leadership Framework also attaches importance to Personal Leadership Resources such as optimism, self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, and managing emotions. These competencies are often expected to be "caught" as much as "taught." Further, many of the skills that principals develop that are specific to supporting students with SEN are developed through their work as teachers. One principal

noted that this might be problematic since teachers do not always develop effective instructional approaches to support students with SEN : "Many subject teachers at my school have no real grasp of how to differentiate to meet the needs of students with special needs. Their understanding of learning needs and IEPs is very superficial and they depend heavily on sending students out of the classroom for support." These prior teaching experiences may result in limited expertise in the administration of programs specifically designed for students with SEN.

There is no doubt that knowing the legislative and technical aspects of school leadership is critically important. However, particularly in the early days of emergency remote learning, principals relied significantly on leadership dispositions more focused on problem-solving skills. These types of skills are often dictated by a person's values and beliefs. The pandemic laid bare educators' beliefs about inclusion (Johnson, 2020) and has provided clarity to the importance of understanding, and fostering, attitudes that value inclusion as part of the preparation and in-service training of principals. Put bluntly : Principals who believe in the inclusion of students with SEN will work to ensure that, even in a global pandemic, these students are at the centre of planning, communication, and support. Using a Universal Design for Learning framework, principals can ensure that all students are effectively supported going forward. One principal stated it this way, "All students matter and we need to individualize as much as possible to what their needs are."

Going forward post-pandemic, organizations that support principals (in Ontario, these are the Ontario Principals' Council, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, and l'Association des directions et des directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes) need to consider professional learning to support principals' leadership competencies, both in the technical aspects of school leadership and those that foster values congruent with inclusive schools.



Le soutien des élèves ayant des besoins spéciaux pendant la pandémie a entraîné des défis spécifiques que les directeurs d'école ont dû relever. Par le biais d'entrevues et de sondages, des directeurs d'école de l'Ontario ont décrit leurs expériences en matière de soutien aux élèves ayant des besoins spéciaux et ont identifié des ressources utilisées pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, tout en précisant comment ils ont fait face à ces défis. Nous faisons état de trois leçons clés pour les responsables d'établissement qui soutiennent les écoles inclusives : l'importance d'une approche écologique, la nécessité que l'apprentissage professionnel comprenne à la fois des aspects techniques et des valeurs, et la nécessité de parler davantage de la santé mentale des responsables d'établissement. L'article présente des considérations à l'intention des directeurs d'école et des leaders du système éducatif à l'ère post-pandémique.

### Lesson 3 : We need to talk more about – and support – the mental health of principals

A clear theme that has emerged from the studies is the critical importance of acknowledging, and developing mechanisms to support, the mental health of all educators, including principals. One principal stated that, “We could have done a better job preparing ourselves for the onslaught of mental health concerns that came up during this time.” Another commented that, “I have also been very aware of how the distance learning has impacted the well-being of all of us.” The pandemic has impacted the mental well-being of all those involved in schooling, including principals.

There have been significant efforts to support the mental health of students and teachers prior to the pandemic. However, the pandemic has revealed that largely “missing” in mental health discussions has been the importance of acknowledging – and supporting – principals’ mental health. One principal summarized this need succinctly, “I am exhausted and don’t feel supported or understood by the board.” Many principals in the studies shared examples of how they have had to navigate the personal-professional space that was exacerbated by the pandemic and which blurred the lines with work and family responsibilities. One principal stated it this way, “I have completely failed at [boundaries between work and home]... I am super accessible to staff and families.”

Principals made significant efforts to support students with SEN during the pandemic. However, the level of responsibility and support sometimes affected their own mental health. We need to pay attention to this concerning aspect of school leadership as it continues a worrying trend that began before the pandemic (Wang et al., 2018). The impact of the pandemic on principals’ mental health is also a form of secondary trauma (Panlilio & Tirrell-Corbin, 2021) adding further urgency to the need to support principals’ mental health.

### Conclusion

The pandemic has had lasting impacts on most everyone, not least of which are adults who parent or educate students with SEN. The pandemic has shed light on inequities that exist for students with SEN and their families. Principals have worked toward reducing some of the gaps. Through the experience of principals who engaged in the studies highlighted in this article, we are able to discern several lessons: the importance of an ecological approach to supporting students with SEN, professional learning needs to include both technical and values aspects, and the need to talk more about the mental health of principals. These three lessons require continued effort to be better understood and addressed as we continue to work in virtual and physical learning environments.

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