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School Principals and Students With Special Education Needs in a Pandemic: Emerging Insights From Ontario, Canada

Steve R. Sider

Abstract: *School principals are ultimately responsible for ensuring the delivery of programmes and services that students with special education needs (SEN) require. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the traditional delivery of these supports and principals are struggling with how to adequately support students with SEN. In this paper, I provide an overview of the ways in which principals in Ontario, Canada are attempting to direct services to students with SEN while working remotely. I consider some emerging insights into their experiences and what might be learned from a period of emergency remote learning. The conclusion provides an opportunity to consider lessons learned in other contexts and the particular need to ensure that students with SEN are central to long-term planning efforts.*

Keywords: Special education needs, school leadership, inclusion, work intensification

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic led to all schools being closed in Ontario, Canada in mid-March, 2020. The Ontario Ministry of Education instructed school boards to develop plans in the ensuing weeks for 'learn at home' through an emergency remote learning approach (Ontario unveils details of learn-at-home program, students out of school until at least May 4. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, March 31, 2020). Emergency remote learning was a recognition that instruction and learning would not simply be transitioning into an online format but that a wide variety of strategies would need to be considered and incorporated to meet immediate student learning needs from a distance (B. Farhadi, Educating Ontario students during COVID-19. *Broadbent Institute*, April 9, 2020). Principals in the province – and the organisations that support them such as the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC), the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), and l'Association des directions et des directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) – clearly were confronted with a massive task. As a university researcher specialising in inclusion and school leadership, of particular

interest to me in this context was the question: How could principals support the educational programmes of those who are often the most vulnerable in schools, students with special education needs (SEN)?

By early April, as teachers began preparing to deliver educational programmes for students, one of the first steps that principals took was to encourage teachers to contact parents and guardians of students through phone calls. Principals often joined in these efforts. These phone calls provided an early opportunity to discuss specific needs that families were confronting. In some cases, these phone calls also provided a chance to document the technological needs that students' households required in order to engage in emergency remote learning. One of the most significant concerns that principals and school system leaders had was equitable access to educational programming as a result of the reliance on technology for programme delivery (C. Alphonso, Educators worry gap may grow for disadvantaged students stuck at home. *The Globe and Mail,* April 20, 2020).

As I interacted with principals across the province, I began hearing more examples of specific ways in which principals were leading the instructional programme for students with SEN. Principals frequently met with teachers and support staff to problem-solve and develop plans of action for supporting specific students. They sometimes drove to the homes of these students to provide devices that could access the Internet, assistive technologies such as alternative keyboards, and manipulatives that could be used in learning activities. Clearly, principals were leading the way in how to initiate and support educational programming.

After the immediate response in the early days of emergency remote learning, principals began to identify many challenges they and their staff were facing with supporting students with SEN. One principal summarised the challenges as, 'How to meet their [students with SEN] unique needs without some of the environment, schedule, transitions, equipment, and relationships that support daily learning.' The challenges were not static; they seemed to change daily. One of the more recent challenges, related to access to technology, has been the use of video-conferencing technology to support working one-on-one with students with SEN (K. Rushowy, Ontario teachers told to 'embrace' live video conferencing as school shutdown continues. *The Toronto Star,* May 8, 2020). Concerns about equity of access and privacy have prevented most efforts to engage in this type of support (ETFO 2020). Yet, in remote learning environments students with SEN often require video-conferencing to enable individualised supports. This is one of the emerging challenges of supporting students with SEN in the midst of the pandemic: How do we provide the supports students require while also adhering to legal, societal, and professional expectations such as ensuring privacy?

Lessons Learned in Supporting Students With Special Education Needs

I hold four national research grants (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) which focus on examining inclusive practices of principals (Sider 2019a; Sider, Maich

& Morvan 2017). Our research team has been particularly interested in examining a conceptual idea of how critical incidents inform the practices of principals in supporting inclusion for students with SEN (Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto 2014). The pandemic is a critical incident on a massive scale. Since the end of April, 2020 I have been working with the Ontario Principals' Council – the largest principals' organisation in the province representing more than 5,000 principals – to better understand the experiences of principals as they navigate how to support all students in the midst of emergency remote learning. We are surveying and interviewing principals across the province to better understand their experiences in the pandemic. So what can we learn from their experiences? Here I share three emerging lessons: beliefs about inclusion, work intensification, and leadership nimbleness.

What Do We Really Believe About Inclusion?

The current situation is laying bare people's beliefs about inclusion. Principals are sharing many examples where they have made significant effort to support a child with a SEN. They have shared stories of teachers and support staff going out of their way to provide valuable engagement with students with SEN. The examples being shared illustrate that the vast majority of teachers believe deeply in inclusion. However, principals are also sharing examples of comments from a small minority of teachers who are reluctant to support students with SEN in this time. This comment is illustrative of this, 'The student never worked for me during the regular class. Why should I help them now?' These types of statements, which reflect a reluctant or resistant attitude, demonstrate the 'unfiltered' perceptions of some teachers with regard to inclusion. It is easier to indicate a belief in inclusion when traditional structures and specialised supports are in place; when the responsibility for supporting students with SEN is more explicitly and directly the responsibility of a teacher, as it is in the time of an emergency, deep-seated beliefs are laid bare (Johnson 2020)

The Work Intensification of Principals is Escalating

The work intensification of principals is well documented (e.g. Pollock 2016) and the pandemic has escalated the pressures of the position. Principals are incredibly hard-working, creative leaders who are working with their staff to adapt to the current situation and to provide the best supports possible for students with SEN. For example, principals have shared how they have worked with their teachers to find short-term solutions to support students who are medically fragile or with significant behavioural needs. In data collected from a questionnaire I developed with OPC during April and May, principals identified the following ways that they are supporting their staff in these types of efforts: Resource teachers and educational assistants are meeting daily with students by phone, loaning technology devices and providing instruction remotely on how to effectively use them, and distributing resource kits including puzzles, visual cards, and math manipulatives. Of more than 50 Ontario principals who completed the questionnaire, the vast majority indicated that the most

significant strategy they and their staff are using is daily or weekly phone contact with students and their families. This speaks to the importance of ongoing contact and relationships as primary, foundational aspects of care. This increased contact also leads to increased challenges in balancing work and personal responsibilities.

Principals themselves are trying to navigate the complex nature of life in a pandemic. Many have shared examples of their own struggles such as providing school leadership while working from home and supporting their own children and family. Many have expressed concern about the lack of work responsibility boundaries during this time, as one stated, 'I have completely failed at [boundaries between work and home] ... I am super accessible to staff and families.' This accessibility and support for students and families is remarkable. I am witnessing this in dozens of situations involving principals across the province. However, it does raise concerns for the mental health of principals who before the pandemic were already expressing concerns about the amount of work responsibilities they care for (Wang, Pollock & Hauseman 2018).

Nimbleness in Leadership

I have increasingly heard from principals and school system leaders that principals are having to focus more on school management rather than instructional leadership (C. Finn, Why school principals need more authority. *The Atlantic,* April 4, 2012). Aspects of management, such as establishing and ensuring organisational procedures, can be difficult to maintain and can become bureaucratic burdens in times of crisis. Principals are struggling with how to adapt to legislative and procedural expectations to ensure that the needs of all children are being met. They are also struggling with the amount of information that they are dealing with from school systems and government ministries. Yet through this, principals continue to provide nimble and nuanced leadership to schools. They have shared examples of how they are working with teachers and support staff to develop support materials for students. They are making multiple phone calls to students to walk them step-by-step through learning activities. Many are supporting families who are often overwhelmed with the needs of their child as well as the other stresses that have come with the pandemic. Principals are sharing examples of how they might spend an hour on the phone with a family and then transition to another family to support them before moving to yet another student need. Principals are identifying and responding to dilemmas and challenges on a daily basis. This reflects the types of nimble leadership skills that might not show up in organisational charts, policy memoranda, or even leadership competency and standard frameworks. As Gurr and Drysdale (2020) state, 'Good leaders are able to make sense of ambiguous situations' (p. 27). Nimbleness in leadership – being able to recognise and effectively respond to multiple urgent situations without significant input from others – is unfolding as a critical aspect of leadership in emergency situations.

Moving Forward: Considerations From Other Contexts

Emergency situations are not unique to the current pandemic. As I work with principals in Ontario, I have also been examining what we can learn from those principals who have worked in emergencies before the pandemic. Over the past 15 years, I have been engaged with research on inclusion and school leadership in contexts such as Egypt, Ghana and Haiti. Working in these contexts has clearly demonstrated to me that principals in difficult situations often rise to the challenges of their contexts (Sider 2019b; Sider & Jean-Marie 2014). Further, the leadership framework provided by Gurr and Drysdale (2020) provides excellent conceptual considerations in this area. So what can we learn from others who have experienced emergency remote learning?

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is a global network of organisations who work to provide quality education in emergencies and post-crisis recovery efforts. A recent webinar they hosted provided lessons of how schools have responded to other crises in the past including war in Kosovo, the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, and the recovery from the tsunami in Thailand and Sri Lanka (INEE 2020). Although the focus of the INEE has not been specifically on what principals do to support learning in these emergency settings, the examples the INEE has provided have reminded me that, although we think this is the first time the world has dealt with a massive emergency, it is in fact not. Others have dealt with emergencies that have severely disrupted education, sometimes for years. Perhaps this is a time when regions in the global North can look to those in the global South for case examples and lessons in effective practices to move from the initial period of emergency learning to longer-term planning.

One lesson we can learn is that those with SEN are often the first ones marginalised in an emergency and often the last ones re-integrated into schools (Stough, Ducy & Kang 2017). Avoiding this is critical not only for the students with SEN and their families but for society more broadly. As the person ultimately responsible for the educational programme of all students in a school – including those with special education needs – principals must consider the needs of students with disabilities first and then plan for other students. This basic premise of Universal Design for Learning – what is necessary for some is beneficial for all – will serve to ensure that all students are effectively supported in the time of emergency remote learning and beyond.

As we look to move from the immediate phase of engaging with emergency remote learning to increasingly online learning and some school-based supports, it is important to engage with research around these experiences. Key research questions going forward include:

1. What is the changing nature of principals' work in the pandemic and the ensuing phases of learning specifically for students with special education needs?

2. What lessons are being learned from this pandemic that will support school leadership and inclusion for future emergencies?

3. How might principals, researchers, and policy makers work together across provincial/regional and national lines for a collaborative, cohesive approach to inclusion in times of crisis?

These questions can serve as a framework for future work in this area. Principals are dealing with lots of uncertainty on how to help the students who are the most vulnerable and with the most significant learning challenges in a remote learning environment. There are no easy answers to these challenges but a research agenda that considers these questions will be vital to better understanding our current pandemic response and that which might inform our response in the future.

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