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Contents

School Leaders' Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Two-Pronged Approach

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature of school principals' work. Today, principals are expected to be exceptional managers and excellent leaders in a time where the pace of change has increased exponentially. Preliminary data suggest that principals in Ontario, Canada are pivoting their work: They are engaging in a two-pronged approach to lead public schools during the pandemic crisis. They are extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while (b) simultaneously extending their role of instructional leader to digital instructional leader. This paper, informed by preliminary focus group data, poses thought-provoking questions that principals are wrestling with in their practice around creating conditions for students to learn and teachers to teach, while at the same time seeking out new ways to support online learning and the operations of public schooling through what they call 'extensive digital instructional leadership'.*

Keywords: COVID-19, school principal, safe schools, digital instructional leadership, virtual schooling, equitable access

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered school principals' work across the globe. In Canada, the impact on principals' work depends on where their school is located: Each province/territory is responsible for their own public education and as such there is no national Canadian education system (Pollock & Hauseman 2015). Presently, provincial and territorial governments are working to ensure public school systems continue to function; throughout Canada, these governments have explored several options with varied start dates. For example, in June 2020, the province of Ontario announced that, depending on the public health situation, it was exploring three possible scenarios to reopen schools in September 2020: (a) normal school day routine with enhanced public health protocols but regular class sizes; (b) modified school day routines with an adapted delivery model, including smaller

class sizes and potentially alternate day or week delivery; and (c) at home learning, which would include remote/synchronous learning (Ontario Ministry of Education 2020).

Each of these potential scenarios will require a different approach to school delivery. Today, principals are expected to be exceptional managers and excellent leaders in a time where the pace of change appears to have increased exponentially (Pollock & Wang 2019, 2020; Wang & Pollock 2020). Principals and other educators are now considered the 'other first responders' (Osmond-Johnson, Campbell & Pollock 2020) in this current pandemic. School leaders are now expected to not only draw on their current skills and knowledge to meet the challenge of schooling students during the pandemic, but to also do so while developing new knowledges and skills and pivoting some of their current roles.

The need for new knowledges and skills arises from several factors, with the two most prevalent being the unknown nature of the SARS-CoV-2 and the need to consider alternative ways to successfully educate students amidst this outbreak—both requiring principals to carry out their role in different ways. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the work of school principals, we conducted a virtual pilot with 17 Ontario principals as part of our federally funded study on principals' work. Preliminary data from this virtual pilot focus group suggest they are engaging in a two-pronged approach to lead public schools during the pandemic crisis. They are extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while (b) simultaneously extending their role to include being a digital instructional leader. This paper, informed by the aforementioned preliminary data, is intended to pose thought-provoking questions and considerations that Ontario—and, undoubtedly, global—principals are wrestling with in their practice around creating conditions for students to learn and teachers to teach while at the same time seeking out new ways to support online learning and the operations of public schooling through what they call 'extensive digital leadership'.

Prong 1: Safe Schooling and Future Schooling

Ontario school principals' duties include being legally responsible for the health and safety of all students. Jurisdictions expect principals to connect with representatives from other government agencies in an effort to better meet student needs or provide student support services. Principals are also expected to report any child welfare concerns to their superintendent and appropriate government officials and to notify the appropriate authorities of any outbreaks of infectious or contagious diseases (Pollock & Hauseman 2015). Building on their existing responsibilities for a safe and healthy school, principals now must also develop a comprehensive understanding of COVID-19, including causes, symptoms, public health protocols, and preventions. They also need to do so in a media environment permeated with misinformation, in which they must sort and filter information to find the most up-to-date and accurate information as new details about the disease are discovered rapidly. Principals, along with teachers, are now part of the public health effort to prevent the

spread of disease and they will do so within very different local contexts. What will this mean for schooling in the near to immediate future? Collateral issues will also influence principals' work: lockdowns, quarantines, self-isolation, physical distancing, and economic turmoil have also presented other health and safety issues for students, parents, teachers and school principals themselves that impact public schooling. What will principals face during the various phases of schooling over the coming months? These questions can fall into several categories: prevention, intervention, and the health and well-being of students, staff, and principals themselves.

Prevention

When we think of prevention, we think about stopping something before it happens. During the COVID-19 pandemic, principals are being tasked with trying to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among their student and staff populations. Prevention concerns centre around physical aspects of schooling and the practices that need to be introduced ahead of time. Considerations associated with physical aspects of schooling can include how best to use physical space for physical distancing, whether or not to use plexiglass on each desk, the cost of installing hand sanitizer dispensaries in each classroom, whether or not to provide masks for individual students and how to dispose of them, and the cost of and risk associated with hiring of additional custodial staff—to name a few.

Preventative school preparation will be futile, however, if modifications to school delivery and practices are not introduced before schooling begins. One way to communicate preventative practices is through curriculum modifications that specifically target infection prevention. Principals may need to consider how professional development around these curriculum additions will be delivered, and by whom. Organizationally, will schools run in shifts? Will there be recess, and, if so, will it also be staggered? Principals will have to consider how applied courses with tactile experiments and limited resources will take place. All these considerations will impact the bottom line and principals will be faced with new budgetary decisions and considerations.

Intervention

Inevitably, preventative planning can only go so far as it is impossible to control the behaviour and practices of all students and staff inside and outside the school premises. For this reason, interventions need to be in place for schools to continue to function. Principals will need to ensure that there are effective communication processes in place. There will need to be new explicit protocols and communication strategies not only with parents and the local communities but also with public health authorities to relay information about infection and subsequent procedures enacted to contain the spread. Implementing interventions means hot spots and clusters have popped up in local schools and communities; principals will need to think about temporary school closures while learning continues. What impact will future

school closures have on student learning, especially for students who are already struggling with engagement?

Health and Well-Being of Students, Staff, and Self

With a slowed economy and increased job loss, many families are struggling. In this environment, principals will need to consider the emotional and social well-being of their students. The pandemic is having a psychological impact alongside the physical symptoms for all those affected (Zhou et al. 2020). The emotional consequences of the pandemic vary from students being anxious about catching the virus, to students experiencing loss of loved ones, to others whose families are struggling financially because of the economic fall. All of which can have an impact on students' capacity and will to learn. The well-being of teaching staff and paraprofessionals associated with the school is also a concern as many face health, family, and financial issues related to the virus.

Principals' own wellness while leading through the pandemic must also be a consideration. Pre-pandemic, school leaders across the globe were experiencing work intensification (Pollock & Wang 2019, 2020; Riley 2019; Wang & Pollock 2020). How the stress of leading and managing schools through a pandemic will influence principals' wellness remains to be seen, but chances are the consequences of school closures and reopening—and, in some cases, re-closure—will do little to ease work intensification or principals' stress and burnout.

Prong 2: Digital Instructional Leadership

Pre-pandemic, principals' leadership was influenced by several factors, such as local context, policy, and program reform. Although these factors continue to exist today, changes in the structure of schooling during the pandemic have turned principals' attention to online learning and leading schools virtually. It should be noted that although online, virtual schools and networks of schools existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gurr 2006), employees were hired specifically to work within these online, virtual contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools and school systems have engaged in virtual, online learning to varying degrees, and in the majority of these cases few educators or students had any control over the delivery of virtual public education. Essentially, entire school systems abruptly converted to some form of virtual or distance education with many educators and leaders given next to no preparation. This abrupt structural change poses many questions about leading and supporting learning in a digital/virtual/online work environment.

Supporting Online Learning

Pre-pandemic, there was substantial investigation in the use of information communication technology (ICT)/Advanced communication technology (ACT) in principals' work (Gurr 2000; Lanctôt & Duxbury 2017; Pollock & Hauseman 2018). The use of ICT/ACT and social media has grown exponentially now that schools are physically closed, and learning has been

moved to virtual engagement. What is the most appropriate way to deliver schooling online? As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for supporting and ensuring that effective pedagogical practices and successful student learning happen. Now they are to do this using technological media supported by web applications and platforms. In this rapid process, teachers in some jurisdictions are being asked to deliver learning programs online. Online teaching and learning is not merely taking a face-to-face program and delivering it via a web-based conference platform (Ben Jaafar 2020). Considerations for students include the hardware and software issues (e.g. WiFi accessibility, learning devices such as tablets, laptops and smartphones) and also the skills required to navigate software and new knowledge on how to interact on such platforms. These considerations are also not exclusive to students but also include teachers and school principals themselves as well.

Key findings from a recent National Association of Elementary School Principal survey about the COVID-19 pandemic (NAESP 2020) reported that scaling up education technology was a concern for principals, with 82 percent of respondents indicating that they were unsure how their district plans to scale up education technology to deliver curriculum and instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals also raised concerns about creating equitable learning opportunities for all students. These concerns included internet access at home; access to learning devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones; and limited instructional capacity for online learning, to name a few. These concerns, although US-based, were also echoed in the recent virtual pilot focus group with Ontario principals.

Leading and Managing Virtual Schools

Pre-pandemic, there were emerging academic debates around whether or not leading in a virtual world used the same practices with altered communication skills or if it required different approaches to leadership (Gurr 2006; Pulley & Sessa 2001; Pulley, Sessa & Malloy 2002). Preliminary findings from the Ontario virtual pilot group indicate that although many principals are engaging in similar leadership practices, how they go about it and the nature of this work has changed. When asked if their work had changed, the majority indicated that their work has pivoted: the priority list has slightly altered and, in terms of time allocation, what they spend their work time on has shifted. In terms of managing their work, principals will need to think about which shareable document platforms should be used and the complexities surrounding their use (e.g. ease of use, data protection, etc.).

When thinking about leading virtual schools, principals in the virtual pilot sessions stated that their role had also pivoted to concentrating on supporting educators, students, and parents in transitioning to a different way of schooling. This supporting role also included being an active information mobilizer and policy interpreter as new rules and regulations were at one point being released on a daily basis with little to no warning. In a virtual world, school principals need to consider matters such as managing the physical distance between school members, establishing effective communication strategies, motivating staff, and establishing trust (DasGupta 2011).

Proactively Reducing Issues of Access

The pandemic does not exist in a silo. The pandemic has brought many of the unresolved inequities in our public education systems (and society in general) to the forefront. Principals indicated in the virtual focus group session that they were concerned about how pre-existing inequities were being exacerbated and new issues were arising around access to quality education for students and parents. For example, some students do not possess the technology to participate in online learning. Others may have the technology, but where they live does not have accessible WiFi. Still others may have the necessary requirements but not the physical space that is conducive to active learning. Other students may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 because family members are essential workers, or because they have ill family members, or a myriad of complex factors that influence their ability to learn during the pandemic. Principals are being asked to help address these issues.

Conclusion

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for a global case study that responds to the question Avolio and Dodge (2000) identified two decades ago: 'The question is not whether to study e-leadership but where to start' (p. 633). Studying e-leadership during a pandemic will require researchers to consider: 'What conditions need to be in place for students to learn and for teachers to teach, and how will leaders across the system adapt to support these conditions?' (Osmond-Johnson et al. 2020: n.p.), but more importantly we as education researchers can also take this opportunity to think outside the box and consider how this might be a unique chance to change public education to create more equitable school systems in the long term. In closing, a good place to start is to consider two crucial questions that Netolecky (2020) posed:

1. What is it that we've missed that we want to bring back into schooling and education?
2. What is it that has been removed that we do not want to return to?

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