Exploring School Principals' Experiences During the First Four Months of the Pandemic as a Way to Reimagine Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This study involved interviewing Canadian principals (N = 37) to determine how they responded to students with special education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yamamoto et al.'s (2014) concept of critical incidents and Heine et al.'s (2006) meaning maintenance model were used to evaluate the transformational power of principals' pandemic experiences in order to reimagine inclusive education. Findings revealed that these critical incidents broadly fell into four categories: 1) family support and the complications associated with partnering with parents virtually, 2) meeting students' needs in new and often innovative ways, 3) disparities in student experiences as a result of virtual schooling and 4) responses required in light of logistical and technical challenges.

Keywords: school leadership, critical incidents, pandemic, special education needs

The transition to emergency schooling, catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, radically altered K-12 education over the span of just a few days. The tools and places where schooling usually happened were no longer available. Connecting with others became difficult as technology, with all its benefits and challenges, became the primary source of communication and instruction. The boundaries and responsibilities of teachers and support staff were abruptly renegotiated. Parents became frontline workers, as many of them took on instructional roles and direct supervision of their children.

Under such extenuating circumstances, one might expect K-12 education to unravel, or school leaders to falter. And yet, when we interviewed 37 Canadian principals who led their schools during the first four months of the pandemic, we found they were more optimistic and hopeful than one might have expected. Although the first few months of the pandemic felt chaotic at times, when asked to reflect on the experience, principals felt it was an opportunity to reimagine and improve schooling. The unanticipated benefits of that difficult time raise an important theoretical tension for all those invested in improving public education: The role of disequilibrium in promoting educational development and improvement.

The concept of "critical incidents" presented by Yamamoto and colleagues (2014) presents a lens for understanding such significant experiences, as does the work of critical education theorists and existential psychologists. In this paper, we fuse Yamamoto et al.'s (2014) concept of critical incidents with Heine et al.'s (2006) meaning maintenance model to dialectically frame how both macro and micro destabilizing experiences, particularly regarding students with special education needs (SEN), can create opportunities for improving education more broadly. We analyze the connection between the incidents experienced by our sample of Canadian principals and the learning takeaways that they reported, to consider the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic caused principals to revise their views of education, reinterpret their experiences, or pushed them to reaffirm an alternative model of education moving

forward.

Two guiding research questions assisted us in approaching this topic. First, what critical incidents did principals identify as influencing their leadership for students with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic? Second, what are the implications for future practice that came from the critical incidents that principals identified? In light of our study's findings, we posit that the disruption to education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has served as an opportunity to rethink schooling, particularly for students with special educational needs.

Literature Review

In March of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school staff across the globe began rapidly transitioning from their traditional in-person classrooms to emergency remote learning over the matter of only a few days and weeks (Fournier et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Although effective virtual and blended learning programs have been around for years, many of the makeshift programs that arose during emergency schooling suffered notable deficits in comparison to these tried-and-true models (Pollock, 2020). For one, these emergency programs were often carried out by staff with little or no training in how to effectively educate online, many of whom lacked the software, programs or adjusted curricula to support these efforts (Pollock, 2020). Consequently, this transition was especially taxing on students with SEN, who often rely upon physical aids and trained staff to assist with their learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Importantly, such supports may not find a suitable equivalent in an emergency online model (Gershenson & Hayes, 2017; Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016). These problems were further compounded for students who faced additional challenges at home. Students from low-income families, those facing language barriers, and students with insufficient parental involvement were forced to navigate a system that relied upon technology, limited paraverbal feedback, and largely unsupervised learning (Education Trust, 2020). Past research has shown that all these factors can pose a significant barrier to learning (Gershenson & Hayes, 2017; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

This transition to emergency schooling placed an immense amount of pressure on all stakeholders involved. Principals and school leaders were especially challenged by these extenuating circumstances, particularly with respect to ensuring that students with SEN were adequately supported and that proper adjustments were made to online programs being developed on-the-fly (Sider, 2020). For many, this meant problem-solving while navigating difficult, emotionally tumultuous scenarios, a phenomenon known as *critical incidents* (Yamamoto et al., 2014).

Yamamoto et al. (2014) investigated the role that emotions play within school leadership development. Participants in their study were invited to recall critical incidents that they had experienced within educational settings. Critical incidents were conceptualized as impactful events that evoked an emotional response. The authors found that critical incidents created *disequilibrium*, resulting in a sense of self-fragmentation in participants. In turn, this sense of disrepair forced school leaders to engage in a process of restorative meaning-making, leading to both the reinvention of themselves, and subsequent leadership development.

Heine et al. (2006) frame 'meaning' as a relational network that models the world, through which individuals can organize and understand their experiences. Threats to meaning, which are often provoked by anomalous experiences, create cognitive dissonance, as individuals have to try to make sense of information that is incompatible with their active worldviews. In keeping with Yamamoto et al.'s (2014) language, critical incidents appear to operate as threats to individuals' sense of meaning; and, in so doing, these incidents provoke a sense of disequilibrium, thereby forcing individuals to renegotiate meaning.

According to Heine et al. (2006), there are three possible responses to the disequilibrium that arises from such challenging incidents. First, individuals may attempt to integrate the incident by *reinterpreting* it, so that it no longer challenges their model of the world. Second, individuals may tweak or *revise* their model of the world to incorporate the new incident. Finally, individuals may *reaffirm* an entirely different model in light of the new incident. This trichotomy of responses to challenging incidents is particularly relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it offers educational researchers a way of conceptualizing school leaders' development during periods of upheaval. Better understanding the psychological strategies principals utilized to integrate anomalous or challenging incidents during the shift to emergency schooling may help inform schooling decisions during future crises and may serve to illuminate

what areas of K-12 education are more or less amenable to change.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of critical incidents, as presented by Yamamoto et al. (2014) represents only one side of the dialectic at play, namely, how an individual changes as a result of meaning-making in the wake of experiencing some emotionally turbulent event. Meaning, however, is socially co-constructed (Heine et al., 2006); thus, the simultaneous changes being experienced by others likely inform how school leaders navigate their own crisis. Consequently, what remains unclear is how multiple stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, support staff) simultaneously adjust during a school-wide crisis, in their own efforts to make sense of the disequilibrium they are experiencing. In this manner, a shortcoming of the model by Yamamoto and colleagues (2014) is that it fails to account for the systemic context in which these challenges are embedded. Thus, an improved analysis must take account of both the *micro* (relationships and interpersonal interactions) and the *macro* (systemic context) simultaneously in order to understand how intersecting layers of tension together contribute to the leadership outcomes being witnessed. For instance, there may be value in considering how a principal's anxiety about emergency schooling interacted with their anxiety about a student's behaviour.

Considering both micro and macro contexts may be especially important for understanding school leadership when it comes to students with SEN. When supporting students with SEN, school leaders frequently need to communicate across differences and adapt their instructional approaches to meet the needs of a diverse set of stakeholders (Bateman et al., 2017; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2009; Thompson, 2017). In one meta-analysis of special education leadership competencies, Thompson (2017) highlighted the importance of inclusive leaders being able to readily adapt the curriculum to learners' needs. Other competencies required similar forms of flexibility, including the creation and implementation of individualized education plans, curriculum delivery and content, and parental and staff collaboration/relationships. On its face, this customized approach to education seems to challenge the one-size-fits-all, *factory model* of schooling, which has been criticized by the likes of Foucault (1975), Freire (1970), Gatto (1992, 2003), and Gray (2013). Such scholars have collectively taken aim at some of the core tenets of traditional schooling, including the teacher's presumed authority, cohorts and content based on age, and study separated into rigid disciplines, arguing that a more radical, systemic overhaul is needed. Thus, while inclusive education may bend or challenge certain paradigms around uniformity, parental involvement, or teaching practice, it has the potential to leave other underlying educational assumptions intact and otherwise unchallenged. Thus, it remains to be seen whether larger events, such as COVID-19, hold the potential to uproot more firmly entrenched macro-level systems and the paradigms built-up around them.

The capacity of a significant event, such as a pandemic, to transform the micro-level interactions among stakeholders is also an important question. The ability of an experience to catalyze a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) appears to be contingent upon many factors, including its potential to force one outside of typical frames of reference. For instance, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as his guiding theoretical framework, Eizadirad (2016) explored the role of immersive travel experiences on culturally responsive teaching. Similar to Heine et al.'s (2006) notion of a meaning model, habitus encapsulates how an individual relates to their own emotions, thoughts, history, and experiences. Eizadirad argued that we often expect mere exposure or proximity to difference to change us. However, within heterogeneous, multicultural societies, such as Canada, we often instead witness superficial and perfunctory forms of cultural inclusion, such as international food or dress days, which ultimately reveal a lack of real or transformative change. Importantly, faux-inclusivity of this kind tends to leave a "one-size-fits-all curriculum and its hierarchical power relations" intact (Eizadirad 2016, p. 5), and fails to address deeper systemic problems pervading schools. In light of this, Eizadirad argued that we ought to assess the value of any new experience according to its capacity to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and shift or alter concrete educational practices.

Eizadirad's work not only helps highlight the importance of interacting with alternative models of meaning, but also draws attention to the important role of emotion in catalyzing change. In line with this, Damasio (2010) has argued that "somatic marking" is ultimately what drives human action and thought. Somatic marking is a process that occurs when one is exposed to emotional stimuli, which, when sufficiently powerful, leave a lasting biomarker in an individual's neural networks. In turn, these

biomarkers ultimately help steer one's future behaviour and decision-making by influencing individuals' perceptions of future opportunities and experiences. Importantly, this feature of human psychology can function as either an obstacle or catalyst to changing one's mind. On the downside, entrenched emotional networks may serve to jade or callus one to the prospect of new ideas (i.e., the reinterpret strategy in Heine et al.'s 2006 language). On the upside, an experience that evokes a strong enough emotional response may prove sufficient to uproot 'somatically entrenched' biomarkers (i.e., revise or reaffirm in Heine et al.'s 2006 language). It is worth noting that other factors may moderate this process, including whether or not these experiences are reflected-on in the wake of an incident (Yamamoto et al., 2014).

Given the importance of emotion in shaping behaviour, it is worth considering how the emotional mileage or impact of an experience may vary between the critical incidents identified by participants. As Pollock (2020) has noted, over the course of the pandemic, school leaders dealt with a variety of scenarios that required pastoral, care-taking behaviour, including providing stability and guidance to those suffering anxieties. Under such circumstances, principals may temporarily suppress their own emotions in order to lend to the appearance of strength for those that rely upon them. Pollock also notes that the migration to online schooling presented a new context for such leadership incidents, and by consequence, the emotions that might accompany them. In light of these points, it is important to consider which obstacles might stand in the way of immersive emotional experiences where one is able to not only experience emotions, but also integrate the lessons contained within such experiences into their future practice.

In consideration of what can be learned from the critical incidents related to students with SEN during the pandemic, the purpose of the current paper was to explore principals' perceptions of the first months of pandemic schooling with respect to supporting SEN and what might be learned to support future change. Therefore, embedded with the theoretical framework outlined above, this study was framed by two guiding research questions. First, what critical incidents did principals identify as influencing their leadership for students with special education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? Second, what are the implications for future practice that came from the critical incidents that principals identified?

Method

The present study investigated the insights and incidents that principals identified as having a significant effect on supports for students with SEN during the pandemic. We recruited participants (N = 37) from four provinces: Newfoundland, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec. Potential participants were contacted through two primary methods of recruitment: invitations distributed through school systems and through the professional networks of the authors. Participants were of different genders, of differing years of experience, in rural and urban schools, English and French language school systems, and elementary and secondary schools. Thirty-six interviews were conducted. One interview involved speaking with two principals concurrently.

Semi-structured interviews were completed by telephone in June, during the final weeks of the 2020 school year. Interview prompts focused on principals' experiences of overseeing the education of students with SEN and their families during the pandemic. This oversight involved coordinating the care of students through communication with teachers, support staff and parents, as well as some direct interactions with students. Participants were asked to describe learnings related to inclusive education that arose from emergency schooling. Participants were also asked about critical incidents with students with SEN, and to report on how these experiences affected their perspectives on inclusive leadership. Three prompts were presented to participants during their interviews:

1. Could you describe one critical incident or experience that stands out in your mind over the time of the pandemic with respect to the inclusion of students with SEN?
2. Has this experience changed the way that you provide leadership or think about your role as a school leader?
3. What is something you have learned through the past three weeks that will influence you going forward with regard to leadership and supporting students with special education needs?

Interview recordings were digitally transcribed and returned to the participants for member checking. After interviews were checked, a thematic analysis was conducted by the research team, and findings were extracted from these themes. In the following section, we report on the key findings from the

study. All potentially identifying information has been changed.

Findings

One of the clearest messages from the interviews was that the pandemic was a stress on the system of education (increased work hours, complex problems). Yet, despite these hardships, principals were filled with stories of innovation, excitement, and problem-solving. In many ways, principals and the systems they oversaw were doing what they do best during the pandemic: responding dynamically to the needs of students. The extraordinary circumstances of emergency schooling meant that, other than health considerations and other non-negotiables, principals had much more latitude to solve problems than what might be expected under normal circumstances. Despite these potential benefits, we know from the critical incidents that principals identified that pandemic schooling provoked powerful emotional responses from the principals.

Guided by the research questions, a more detailed analysis of these findings is presented in the two sections that follow. The first section describes the four themes regarding critical incidents that principals identified; concerns about family support and the complications associated with partnering with parents virtually; meeting individual students' needs in new and often innovative ways; disparate impacts of virtual learning; and logistical and technological challenges. The second section describes implications for future practice regarding technology, class size, lesson length, and stakeholder collaboration.

Family Support

Many of the critical incident accounts that principals shared with us focused on students' primary caregivers. Principals reported that parents were often in need of support themselves. In a school where a pandemic helpline was set up for students, one administrator told us that what surprised him was that it was the parents who used the hotline: "it's as if parents felt helpless and weren't sure how to intervene with their child, especially struggling kids" (Peter). Providing resources for families was not a panacea for success; families had to be willing and able to apply those resources meaningfully at home. One principal told us that she relied on parents to use the visual charts she provided, but noted that: "it is really up to their parents as to whether they take the visual charts and use them" (Jasmin). In many instances, efforts for programming at home were more complicated if family dynamics were already tense. When supporting programming for a divorced family, one principal found it difficult to coordinate services with both households: "just trying to work with the family to, you know, enable the growth to continue to happen was a trial in itself" (Mark). Despite these tensions and challenges, most administrators indicated that marked progress was made with families. For instance, one principal said that even though the parent needed communication by phone rather than by email, the school team was able to coordinate with the family in meaningful ways. Ultimately, success came from the classroom teacher understanding the nature of the problem and "recognizing that each individual family needs something different" (Meredith).

Meeting Students' Needs in New Ways

Many principals noted that they used creative and innovative solutions to meet the needs of students with SEN studying in socially distanced, virtual contexts. As one principal noted, individual considerations were necessary to support one student with SEN who was having a hard time working with specific teachers during whole class video conferencing. The school team worked closely with the student's family to develop an individualized program with alternative video conferencing software where he could have his own meetings: "We've had to really work on what types of programs and things he's really using that he can manipulate a little easier" (Kianna).

Another principal encountered an SEN student who felt overwhelmed by academic demands. These students frequently muted themselves or signed off the video conferencing software when they became anxious. Meeting this student's needs required reducing the number of students on his calls, getting him individualized support, and adjusting academic demands: "he's just focused on math. He has not focused on anything else" (Kay). What appeared to be common to both these scenarios was the need for principals and their teams to reevaluate what setups worked best for their students given the constraints of the new virtual context in which they were working.

Disparate Impacts of the Move Online

Principals witnessed some of their SEN students excelling in the virtual learning environment, while it presented a major obstacle to others. One principal mentioned a grade 5 student who became more engaged after his schooling migrated online. Teachers at his school were so shocked by the transformation that they double-checked with his caregivers to ensure that no one else was doing work on his behalf. When teachers asked the student why things were going so well, the boy mentioned feeling less social anxiety, "He didn't feel like he'd be stupid in front of his peers anymore, he was worried about how his peers would interact with him…he got much more comfortable at home" (Sam). The principal went on to say that this young man's success was counterbalanced by some other students' struggles. One kindergarten student came to his mind. Despite early advances in school prior to the pandemic, this young boy had begun to regress according to his mother. The principal spoke to the student's situation: "he doesn't understand why he can't come to school, he lives right across from the school so he sees it every day and doesn't know why he can't be there" (Sam).

Another principal (Sarah) presented a similar pair of examples of the disparate experiences of SEN students. One student had previously struggled immensely in the classroom due to social pressure. However, since teaming up with an educational assistant online, the student had begun to become more engaged, "He has been working incredibly hard. When he makes mistakes, he's not hard on himself or shuts down—he makes mistakes and keeps rolling. So, it's been incredible to see him build trust through this internet relationship with our educational assistant team" (Sarah). However, Sarah had a daughter of her own with SEN that had a radically different experience. Her daughter, who was not receiving teacher or educational assistant support, became discouraged and overwhelmed. When considering these two extreme cases, the principal said, "So, you see both extremes where children that are high functioning in the classroom, they struggle more because they don't get that direct support from their classroom teacher. But then you see the other extreme where we have educational assistant support that is regularly very intensive and when it's intensive in this setting they're thriving" (Sarah). What appeared to be true for both principals was the importance of connecting their students with SEN to staff and supports capable of helping them cope with the changes happening around them.

Logistics, Technology, and Networking

Educators frequently encountered hiccups, challenges and delays owing to technology, mobilizing staff, and connecting families of SEN students to much needed resources. One principal noted the struggle of getting her staff the hardware they needed, as well as familiarizing them with the software they would be using. As she recounted: "I think that the first challenge was getting everyone the right technology" (Janet). This sentiment was echoed by many others, who expressed the difficulty of coordinating their staff online and operationalizing their school in a virtual space. However, for some, the difficulty was providing families with technology alternatives, as was the case for one principal. They spoke to the challenge of providing a student with paper worksheets when his family refused to let him join in online classes. As the principal noted, this required substantial coordination and communication on the part of the student's classroom teachers. However, to his surprise, "when they finished that first booklet, they requested more, which is great" (Paul).

Other principals had to spearhead efforts to connect SEN students' families to specialists. During typical school years, SEN students often receive a variety of support in schools from district specialists, but after the pandemic hit, principals were faced with reconnecting families to these resources, while balancing provincial health orders and restrictions. As the principal recounted, "layering on the supports in a remote environment was difficult, bringing in, you know, the service providers to work with the family" (Mark).

Implications for Future Practice

Nearly every principal acknowledged that emergency measures were difficult on the systems of schooling: "we know [emergency schooling] is not good for little kids, we know it's not good for kids with special needs" (Tammy). Yet, despite these reservations, the principals we interviewed also acknowledged that the approaches required during emergency schooling may have cascading benefits, even as students return to normalcy in a post-pandemic world.

New Technological Approaches

Principals told us that innovative implementation of personnel and technology will have a role in schools, even as students return to in-person schooling: "We have to now accept that using technologies to reach students is not going to go away and …has to be dovetailed with what we do in-person with students" (Tammy). Some principals told us that they wondered why they had not already been using those new approaches: "I'm looking at some of the practices that I'm doing now online [recording of lessons, one-on-one meetings, online availability] and I'm like 'why haven't I been doing that?'" (Carl). Most of the principals we spoke with told us that, while many families and students floundered during the pandemic, some of the students enjoyed remarkable success. In fact, the principals told us that many of the adjustments they had to make to their school community, especially when it came to supporting students with SEN, have been necessary for a long time:

> Often, people will say that the education system is just a big machine that takes a long time to change. It isn't capable of changing. But guess what? We have just proven that yes it can change, because we have done it all over the world. (Shane)

While the migration to online spaces may have come with its fair share of challenges, it appeared that school leaders did not intend to revert wholesale to typical school models post-pandemic.

Individualized and Small-group Instruction

One of the beneficial adjustments that came from emergency schooling was flexible class sizes. Online schooling allowed for many teachers to facilitate small group instruction and provide one-on-one support: "[Teachers] can deal directly with [student] concerns and provide additional examples and support, especially kids in spec ed" (Andrew). Students with SEN appreciated the autonomy that synchronous schooling allowed: "In a private setting with one-on-one tutoring over the internet he has been showing up every single day ready to learn—he has been working incredibly hard" (Donald). Alice told us that one thing she learned from emergency schooling is "how important it is to put that one-to-one or one-to-two or three supports in place for children *as they need it*, it's not dispensable, it's not." Teachers were not the only ones with more opportunities for meaningful interactions with students. The flexibility of emergency schooling meant that support staff, like educational assistants, were "actually meeting with these students individually with less distractions on technology which has helped them be successful" (Karla). Principals themselves increased the personal contact they had with students with SEN by joining educational assistants in their one-on-one sessions with students: "I call them one-by-one with students who are struggling, and then it's just as much with the kids who had needs in terms of academic behaviour, or even social skills or self-esteem, the whole range" (Jerome). One-on-one interventions with educational assistants, special education resource teachers, and teaching staff members was a "winning practice [and] one of the good things that's … going to further transform the role of these interveners in our schools" (Jerome). Principals recognized that the small group instruction that was possible during emergency schooling was something they wanted to bring back to in-person schooling. As described by Arabella:

> In a classroom of 20-30 students, all teachers know that small group instruction is the best bang for your buck. If you can get your classroom set up and you can get a small group in front of you, those are the best educational moments.

What appeared to emerge during the pandemic was an opportunity for principals, teachers and staff to compare what might be considered 'ideal teaching ratios' to those often found within the context of typical schooling. Such changes to the classroom have long been fought for by teachers, but perhaps capturing the attention of school principals will help in advocating for such changes moving into the future.

Lesson Duration

Principals also told us the changes made to lesson durations aligned with the individual learning needs of students with SEN. Initially, Principals structured emergency schooling to mirror as closely as possible the regular day of in-person schooling, especially in the time immediately after the transition to emer-

gency schooling. However, after the transition to emergency schooling was settled, educational teams realized that there was value in being able to design the school day around the learning needs of their students: "It took a couple of months to kind of figure out that 45 minutes is just too long for some of these kids. And maybe it needs to be split up into maybe three 15-minute chunks" (Ahmet). According to the Principals, "short spurts of teaching" were so beneficial for students with SEN that, even in the midst of managing emergency schooling, Principals were already wondering about how they might bring flexible class arrangements to in-person schooling: "It's time to think about how we welcome them to school to make sure they continue that success when we come back to school" (Toyah).

The addition of asynchronous learning into the regular school day was another change that came about as educational teams began to settle into emergency schooling. For some students, the autonomy that came with asynchronous learning helped them to work harder than they did during in-person schooling. As described by Jordana, when the educational team at her school decided that they "don't really care what order [students] are doing anything in" they found that the student output increased: "Kids are actually completing it and we are shocked and pleasantly surprised." Working from home reduced many of the distracting elements of classrooms (other students, social complexities of the classroom, unfamiliar setting) and allowed students with SEN to focus on engaging with the work: "With less distractions some of our learners with special needs were really able to excel and focus better" (Ellen).

Collaboration Among Stakeholders

One of the consistent messages from principals was that the change to emergency schooling required intensive collaboration. During the first four months of the pandemic, principals found that increased meetings were necessary to address the challenges they faced: "We had to intensify basically the frequency of these meetings so that people were reassured that we had all the necessary information, to make the right decisions there. And that, I would say, made a difference" (Ian). Fraser told us that collaborative meetings with educational teams that would normally happen every month were necessary on a weekly basis. During emergency schooling, principals made it a practice to check-in with teachers regularly. In addition to weekly staff meetings, Rosalie told us that her team found time every day for "optional check-in opportunities [to] troubleshoot and share concerns, ideas, and strategies." Principals told us that increases in collaboration was something novel for many of their staff members: "I think that the people who have experienced it, know that they all benefit from it…I think that I have a lot of staff that have not experienced that before" (Ariella). Working schedules were re-built around connection: "Right now we are really trying to re-examine our schedule to see how can we afford that time for … connections points for teachers to come together and talk about children" (Riley). Principals reported that the emphasis they placed on collaboration had powerful and innovative results. According to Daniella, "that frequent communication has brought us incredible results. So, we're going to have to find a way to … keep it alive, even when we're in school full time." Many principals described the innovative approaches to emergency schooling that came from those collaborative meetings. The account from Ceri of an audiobook project provided a salient example of an innovation that was possible because of their efforts to maximize collaboration:

> Each staff member read a chapter of the book and we put it into one audio file. We all introduced ourselves like, "I miss you," and we read the book. It was a very high interest book which was good news and the kids absolutely did really well. They really interacted with the lessons and the activities the teacher created to go with the book. It was surprising because we probably got more participation than we would have guessed in the classroom had we done the same, and who knows if it was our own created audiobook or the way she made these very interactive lessons.

Principals also told us that students found many ways to connect with each other during emergency schooling. For example, some principals told us their students would ask to stay on the online forum so they could socialize together after class. It was a surprise to Amara to see her students with SEN talking together after class, without requiring adult facilitation:

The kids all said "okay teachers you can all go, we're just going to stay, if it's okay" and they

> would stay on that [virtual] environment throughout the day….It was a big "ah ha" moment for me because I always worried that a lot of social interaction for our special needs kids, was really strongly facilitated by the teachers in the class, and here we recognize, that no, they actually created their own learning community, in a very novel way, using the tools that they had on hand.

Not having regular social time meant that students had to make their own opportunities to be together. Principals were cognizant of the students' need for social opportunities so some educational teams used student social time as a reward for completing academic work: "[the students] can earn the opportunity to have these social times with [their] friends which is a massive reward for kids right now" (Nakita). In general, socializing was more difficult online than it might during in-person schooling, but for some students with SEN online socializing also came with benefits. For example, the obstacles that tend to keep students with SEN from meaningful social time were less restrictive online: "Some of our special ed kids…seem to be quite happier online because they don't have that social piece where they know they're different, they know they stand out. I think for that it's been good, and maybe something we need to look at investigating how do we make them feel more included, make them feel more accepted when we're back here" (Adrianna).

Discussion

Managing schooling during a pandemic was no small feat. Interviews suggested that principals who experienced critical incidents because of the pandemic also demonstrated ways to reimagine education going forward. These learnings included an enhanced emphasis on family support, challenging the ways in which schools have traditionally operated, identifying new opportunities for digital technologies and online learning, and increased engagement with differentiated learning, all of which may be particularly important for students with SEN.

Principals noted the value of increased support of stakeholders during the pandemic. Some of this increased communication appeared to serve the same ends it had previously, but were nevertheless required in light of the novel challenges presented by the pandemic. Other forms of support created the opportunity for cross-system communication and thereby provided an unexpected solution to the problem of diffused responsibility often characteristic of complex, disconnected networks. As Gatto (1992) has lamented, networks typically treat the individual as piecemeal, and only appreciate them for a part of their whole person, leading to a perpetual state of 'fracturedness'. According to Gatto, part of what causes this situation to persist is the existence of disconnected networks that do not communicate with one another. It appears that the conditions created by the pandemic forced systems into communication with one another, serving as a precursor for meeting the whole student's needs, and in turn, forming the basis for genuine community. This panoramic view of the student may stand to revise many models which frame them as merely their behavioural record, academic performance, or staffing needs.

The necessarily flexible, and oftentimes improvisational nature of emergency schooling appeared to allow school leaders to question ingrained school traditions and customs, including curriculum schedules, classroom sizes, and the possibility of independent learning. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged principals to adopt schedules that were more responsive to student and teacher needs. Principals also demonstrated an increased recognition of a dynamic learning environment in which basic physical and psycho-emotional needs were highlighted and addressed before academic tasks were pursued (Sider, 2020). Students with SEN were provided with alternative learning environments and supports which often better met their learning needs. School leaders expressed a desire to continue experimenting with many of these dials in the wake of the pandemic, lending to the impression that they stood out as improvements over normal schooling.

Principals noted both the challenges and opportunities presented using digital technologies and the transition to online learning. The learning curve associated with moving online presented a clear impediment, but many principals professed to its value in the aftermath. Many of the challenges that were cited related to technology hesitancy or aversion on the part of families and students. Interestingly, technology was embraced by principals because it allowed educators to accomplish these same tasks in novel ways, begging an important question with regard to the transformative impact that the medium had on the insti-

tution of schooling itself. Under Heine et al.'s (2006) model, the belief that schools need not be in-person would be an example of revision. Importantly, this falls short of reaffirming an alternative framework, which might ask more challenging questions, involving, perhaps, the age cohorts in place, or the primacy of the teacher in classroom instruction. The move towards asynchronous learning might stand as a testament to the independence of students, but that crucially depends on the nature of such experiences. Future studies may investigate whether the use of asynchronous learning merely replicates the structure of traditional schooling or whether it encourages innovative, independent learning.

Finally, principals reported working alongside teachers and parents to customize both the environment and content for learners who struggled. Conversely, principals noted many of the unexpected gains and advances made by particular students who thrived in this new, remote environment. For those principals who have been committed to inclusive leadership, such challenges are likely commonplace, as they are often forced within the normal schooling context to negotiate the needs of the individual against the interests of the group (Cobb, 2015). What did appear to be a novel insight concerned windows for learning. Principals were forced to reconcile with the improved outcomes that came from *less* schooling. Such realizations undermine what Gatto (1992) identifies as inherent institutional logic, i.e., the constant push for an institution to expand or grow regardless of whether that growth benefits those it serves. Under the prescriptions of such institutional logic, schooling would best be served by a surplus of instruction, oversight and homework, not less.

The present paper provides a theoretical framework that can be used to better interpret and analyze critical incidents moving forward. This framework builds on Yamato et al.'s (2014) idea of critical incidents by A) considering the macro context in which they are embedded and B) considering how overlapping critical incidents interact with one another. In addition, this framework can help evaluate the transformative power of such incidents by evaluating the extent to which leadership development reflects a reinterpretation, revision, or reaffirmation of educational paradigms (Heine et al., 2006).

Our study has demonstrated that principals were able to identify micro, interpersonal school-based incidents, which were microcosms of the macro, global critical incident: the COVID-19 pandemic. The impactful events that principals shared with the research team had created disequilibrium for the participants. Principals shared multiple examples of the ways in which these critical incidents forced them to reconsider traditional aspects of schooling. Principals offered examples of ways by which they constructed new meaning in the midst of a global pandemic. This meaning-making provided principals with novel opportunities to reflect upon and reimagine schooling and their role in it. In turn, reflecting on critical incidents provided principals with new competencies to lead schools (Sider et al., 2021).

Baked into the concept of critical incidents is the idea of emotion. Emotion is important because, as Damasio (2010) and Eizadirad (2016) have both noted, it is largely responsible for determining what experiences stand to actually transform individuals' behaviour. While there were multiple emotive phrases within the interviews themselves (e.g., "shocked" [Ellen]; "guilt" [Shae]), transcripts alone fail to capture some of the other evidence which might be used to reveal emotional resonance, such as the tone of the speaker's voice. Moreover, as Pollock (2020) points out, the nature of a health crisis, as well as the online context, forced school leaders into unknown territory, thereby potentially jeopardizing emotional impact in cases where suppressing one's emotions, or staving off emotional exhaustion, became a necessary self-preservation tactic. Thus, it is difficult to know the extent to which these factors may have influenced school leaders' emotional experiences and our findings.

We extended Yamamoto et al.'s (2014) framework to consider how this micro-level (interpersonal interactions) meaning-making interfaces with – and leads to – macro-level (systemic) changes. Experiencing disequilibrium at the individual level, as principals did, while in the midst of massive macro-level change caused by the pandemic, arguably provides opportunities not only for individual change but also for systemic change. In this regard, Heine et al.'s (2006) theory of meaning maintenance suggest that crises may be necessary for reimagining and changing education.

Despite the upending effects of the pandemic, principals in our study demonstrated a steadfast commitment to inclusive and equitable education. They did this through their active engagement with students with SEN, and their families, from the onset of the pandemic. Yet importantly, in line with Heine et al.'s (2006) model, the participants also demonstrated a commitment to revising and pushing for alternative models of education. Principals moved beyond traditional schedules, technologies, and teaching approaches to find new ways to meet the needs of students in their schools. They demonstrat-

ed dynamic and nimble approaches to students with SEN by workshopping novel ways to meet diverse needs in the throes of a global pandemic. Further research needs to be done to see to what degree these micro-level changes have impacted macro-level systems, and whether these adjustments persist in the aftermath of emergency schooling or if a paradigmatic rebound occurs. Although our study has provided glimpses of macro changes as a result of critical incidents, further exploration needs to consider the role of disequilibrium in promoting educational development and improvement on a systemic level.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to traditional schooling in Canada. Students with SEN were perhaps the most vulnerable to a disruption of schooling of this magnitude. School principals play a significant role in fostering inclusive schools and supporting the needs of students with SEN by directing the teachers and staff that work with them, and by setting the tone of the school. Our study found that despite the challenges that the pandemic presented, the principals in our study were able to find novel and impactful ways to support students with SEN in the pandemic. These experiences have raised new questions about how the pandemic has shifted the landscape of traditional schooling in Canada.

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the 37 principals who were part of this study may not have been a representative sample of Canadian principals. The participants self-selected to participate in the study and so the sample may have represented principals who had significant interest in exploring their own experiences over the course of the pandemic. Second, we did not interview school system leaders, such as superintendents. Having done so may have provided more clear relationships between the micro-level critical incidents and disequilibrium experienced at the system level. Finally, the study was completed in a condensed timeframe during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the participants and research team were limited to conducting short interviews to gain rapid insights into the experiences of principals during the pandemic. Longitudinal data collection and more in-depth interviews and fieldwork would provide enhanced understanding of the experiences of principals during the pandemic. Future insights may be gleaned from participants having the time to reflect further upon the critical incidents they have experienced and express their perspectives in more extended formats, such as journals.

In this paper, we raised the following theoretical tension: what is the role of disequilibrium in promoting educational development and improvement? The pandemic, and the critical incidents that principals experienced during it, provided a massive, macro-level disequilibrium in education. These findings point to ways by which this disequilibrium fostered innovative leadership practices of principals. Although we do not yet have longitudinal or system-wide data to see whether these micro-level incidents have led to macro-level changes, we submit that the pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to explore how education may change for the better moving forward. In alignment with Heine et al. (2006), the pandemic has provided a unique context for revising the current education system, or reaffirming an alternative model. Such alternative models may better suit the needs of students with SEN as they become central to a dynamic and responsive education system. This type of schooling would provide flexibility in learning approaches and technological resources, and would position families and relationships at the centre of schools. As noted in this paper, school leaders and principals play a key role in this reimagining of education going forward.

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