

Diversity via Distance

*Lessons learned from families
supporting students
with special education needs
during remote learning*

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BY JESS WHITLEY, JEFFREY MACCORMACK, IAN MATHESON, JACQUELINE SPECHT, STEVE SIDER, AND KIMBERLY MAICH

IN THE SPRING OF 2020, schools were closed to limit the spread and impact of COVID-19 across Canada and beyond. As a result, students were suddenly at home with family, where most stayed for many months. Depending on the province and even school board in question, a range of distance and online options for academic learning were offered and/or required.

Those learning at home included about one million students, from Kindergarten through Grade 12, requiring special education services. These students included those who are gifted as well as those with disabilities, including learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and mental illness. A range of programs, supports, and placements are typically offered in schools across Canada to meet the needs of these students. These include accommodations and universally designed teaching approaches provided in general education classes, as well as specialist supports and therapeutic services provided within general and specialized classes and schools (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020). So, what became of these approaches and supports when the learning context shifted from school to home, and what implications did this have for students and families?

In spite of the tremendous efforts of superintendents, principals, and educators to facilitate what would be known as “emergency” distance learning, we weren’t ready as a school system or as a society. We hadn’t planned for this pandemic and we were at various stages of readiness with respect to infrastructure and professional skill sets. What we learned during those months, however, has important implications for our planning going forward - for all students, but in particular for those with special education needs (SEN). Many students with SEN often require human supports at school to navigate daily life, flourish socially and emotionally, and progress in their academic development. It has been a challenge for systems to provide differentiated and appropriate at-home learning opportunities.

In the spring of 2020, we launched a study exploring the experience of families supporting students with special education needs at home during school closures. We surveyed more than 265 parents from across Canada about the learning and social-emotional supports they received, their self-efficacy in supporting their child’s learning, and their own stress levels. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 25 parents and we continue to



PHOTO: ISTOCK collect stories about the ways in which families and schools have worked together to meet the needs of students, whether virtually or in face-to-face settings.

Our research over the past several months has documented stories of families supporting students with SEN in myriad ways. Two interconnected learnings arose from our study: at-home learning magnified what already existed, and relationships are key. We offer these learnings to guide our future efforts to create the most accessible learning opportunities possible, whether virtual or in bricks and mortar settings.

At-home learning magnified what already existed: the strengths and the cracks

It will not be a surprise to anyone familiar with the complex institution of public education in Canada that there are areas to celebrate and areas for improvement. At-home learning shed a bright light on the strengths, cracks, and tensions that already existed within the education system. These were evident in areas such as instructional

and pedagogical approaches, inclusive school communities, and the roles and resources of families.

Parents of students with SEN described this magnification of strengths and cracks through their stories of at-home learning in the spring. If inclusive approaches and differentiated instruction were evident in the classroom and school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents saw evidence of these in the at-home learning efforts. If those approaches were not previously in place, they were even less apparent during at-home learning. Some parents we spoke to described the ways that their child's educators continued to support them when schools closed, based on their deep understanding of the needs of the individual child. For example, one teacher videotaped herself going through the typical morning routine and shared it daily in order to provide consistency and familiarity for students. Another teacher provided options for assignments so students would all have work available at their level of readiness. Multiple parents described regular, personalized video interactions with their child's teacher or education assistant as the most valuable offering, allowing for social,

emotional, and academic support. Other parents said they disengaged from the at-home learning options because they felt that the offerings were poorly suited for their child, resulting in a sense of exclusion from the learning community.

The magnification effect also applied to the skills, resources, and relationships of families supporting students with SEN. Many parents - typically mothers - who were skilled advocates with experience in navigating the school system, were able to seek out and organize school-based resources to support their child during school closures. Those who had financial, work, or health challenges, or who had fewer resources to draw upon, described an abrupt end to services, which increased stress for the family and the child.

For some families, therapeutic services such as applied behaviour analysis, occupational therapy, or speech/language therapies are typically provided through or by schools. When schools closed, therapies stopped. In some communities, creative solutions were found to continue offering coaching for parents to be able to provide some services, and a few examples of direct service via video were noted. Many parents described the weight and stress of having to provide learning and therapeutic supports for their child(ren), often while facing financial pressures or while working at home.

And yet, while many children and families struggled, others flourished. Many families told us about the positives during school closures. Some parents learned an incredible amount about their child - their academic needs and the ways they learn best. Gains were seen by some parents in their child's social and academic skills, largely because of the efforts made by the parents themselves. Others watched their child grow calmer, happier, and more rested away from the stresses of school schedules and social anxieties. A small number of families we spoke to were prompted by their child's positive experience to consider leaving the public-school system altogether, either to home-school or to explore private schooling options. This response was more typical among well-resourced parents of young children.

Equity issues such as these are well known within education research and policy, but bubbled to the surface in more obvious ways during school closures and at-home learning.

Relationships are key, no matter the modality

Relationships - with school staff, with community-based service providers, and for students in particular, with peers - mattered in so many ways for families. Positive, productive, and personal connections served as the crux of successful at-home learning experiences.

Many parents pointed to the regular, personalized check-ins, by email, phone, or video chat, that were offered by their child's education assistant and/or teacher as the most beneficial support they received from schools. Other parents felt the absence of this connection with their child's teaching team.

Parents who had struggled to build or maintain strong, collaborative relationships with school staff prior to school closures described frustration and helplessness as these deteriorated even further. Conversely, examples of effective at-home learning experiences always included descriptions of the working alliance that existed between parents and school staff.

Peer relationships were also raised as important by parents. For many students with SEN, particularly those with more significant disabilities, connections with peers exist only at school. During school closures, many families in our study worried about the social and emotional well-being of their child - even more than they worried about them falling behind academically. We heard from families that very little attention was being paid to connecting peers with each other during at-home learning.

Moving from learning to doing

So what next? What are we learning about the roles that schools play in the lives of students with special education needs and their families? About the inequities within our systems that privilege some of these families over others? About the ways in which inclusion is experienced by children in school and in virtual settings? And about the relationships that serve as the foundation for the work we do in building communities of learners, educators, and families?

Within and after the pandemic, **planning with difference as the driver, and collaboration the vehicle**, is one path to greater equity and inclusion.

What does this look like? Imagine that we are Grade 5 teachers, planning our virtual class of 30 students. We know that there are a few students reading below grade level, others who need support to

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sustain attention, and some who are struggling with feelings of worry or diagnoses of anxiety. We could prepare our activities and lessons for the day, and then consider what we could do differently to accommodate these students. Or we could think about what is required for these students to be successful and for them to be able to participate fully in the lesson. Do they need frequent movement opportunities? A visual schedule that maps out the online time? Options for working without video? Small group meeting rooms to share ideas and solve problems with less public risk? A range of options to show their work? And with our universal design for learning hat on, we know that these approaches are necessary for some students, but helpful for all students.

We use the term "collaboration" in schools often. The value of collaborative pedagogy is embedded in our policy documents, in our mission statements, and in our specific guidance regarding special education services. And it's one of the toughest things to accomplish in any kind of authentic sense. We are inspired by the stories we were told of families, school staff, and community partners working together, with the voice of the student at the core. We need more of these, and we need to learn from them to tease apart elements we can replicate across the country.

The term "working alliance" has typically been used to describe clients and therapists working together in counselling settings. It has been used recently in education to capture not only the emotional aspect of relationships but also the cognitive aspect of the goals and tasks mutually agreed upon by students and teachers, and by teachers and parents (Knowles et al., 2019; Toste et al., 2015).

Building a working alliance and the key relationships that allow for this collaboration is complex and challenging. We often have the assumption that relationships just happen - as if they are outside of our control and we are at their mercy. Students requiring special education services don't have the luxury of happenstance when it

comes to relationships and collaboration - these need to be in place for them to thrive or even survive.

Focusing on the skills required in collaborating and building working alliances is one step. This skill-building can be done in BEd and continuing teacher education programs - particularly, but not exclusively, those focusing on inclusive classrooms. This idea is not new - collaboration has been listed as key to special education service delivery for decades. But given our findings, renewed attention is warranted.

This collaborative skill-building can best take place within systems that support and foster a focus on partnerships. Are there processes in place that prioritize authentic participation of students, families, and school staff in decision-making? Are there individuals in schools who have specific training in mediation and collaborative problem solving? Are these kinds of interventions considered to support students, families, and school staff in working together? How can some of the virtual approaches we've learned about be leveraged to increase participation? Collaboration is emotional work. Do school staff feel that they have the organizational resources they need? What about the emotional well-being of school staff? Is this being attended to and seen as a priority? Are there approaches in place to make sure that staff have the capacity and supports to engage in difficult conversations?

WE WERE CAUGHT off guard by the switch to emergency schooling in the spring of 2020. Such an abrupt change of modality was unexpected and system-wide. But in what ways are we better prepared going forward? We are told that waves of viral pandemics may be the norm. We have also learned that virtual options are a great fit for some students, and we should consider opportunities for developing online learning

offerings that are truly accessible for all students, including those with SEN. Considering the multiplying effect that emergency schooling had on the strengths, cracks, and tensions of the system, we need to use this time to identify and address the inequities that have been present in the system for decades. Effective, ethical emergency schooling requires a foundation of effective, ethical (non-emergency) schooling.

The pandemic has shifted our reality and much of what we're experiencing, from wearing masks in classrooms to connecting by way of pool noodles in physical education classes, is new, different, and in many cases, uncomfortable. But what the pandemic has brought to light is what already existed when it comes to the education of students with special education needs. We have seen creative, inclusive efforts by many educators that we can learn from in continuing to build practices that support the participation of as many students as possible - particularly by planning with difference in mind. We also need to attend to skills and structures to ensure that students, families, and school staff are well-supported and resourced as they engage in the challenging work of building effective collaborative relationships. **EC**

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