

EP 02 - Principalship at High Priority/High Need Elementary Schools

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:10]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:19]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:23]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K to twelve education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:40]:

We hope that leadership talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy, and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:57]:

Hello everyone, and welcome back to Leadership Talks podcast. Unfortunately, Susie couldn't be here for today's episode, so I'll be doing my best to steer the ship today. And I'm really delighted today because we're going to be speaking with Umar Qureshi about supporting students in high-need schools. So we're really looking forward to this conversation today. But before we dive into that, I want to welcome Umar to the show. And Umar, it's really great to have you here. Before we start to talk a little bit about some of the work and research that you've been doing, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your role and the current work context that you're in?

Umar Qureshi [00:01:39]:

Sure. Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me here. I'm really excited to share some of my experiences and what some of our thinking is like at the school level and how that impacts

our students. So currently, I'm a vice principal here in Hamilton, Ontario, at an elementary school. My area of research at OISE as a student there is focusing on high need elementary schools in Ontario. So what that particular context looks like, who that impacts, who's in the school and what supports we're offering and that support, you can think of it as a few layers. One is, of course, the students first and foremost. That's at the core of all our discussions.

Umar Qureshi [00:02:21]:

But then there's also the component of staff and that includes EA's, teachers, principals, vice principals. My particular focus is actually on the principal. I've narrowed down my topic from many iterations and that seems to be something that has also many layers. But the number of stakeholders that are in the school are so many, so the impact can be varied. And of course, there's also the parental and the family component as well. And we've also extended it to other third party agencies that may be in the neighbourhood or that we normally connect with to support students and schools. So that's kind of where we're at right now.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:02:59]:

And I know that your research focuses on sort of equity based school leadership approaches and competencies. And you've mentioned this concept of a high-need school. So maybe before we start talking about some of your research, how do you characterise a high-need school? What does that mean to you?

Umar Qureshi [00:03:17]:

So when I first started at the board, I landed at a high need elementary school. So I was excited that, okay, what does this look like? What does this mean? I knew a little bit about the need, but I discovered through some of my research that there isn't actually a high need elementary school definition in Ontario. In the states, we do have a definition, and that definition characterises a high need school, and also elementary and secondary as a school where we have high absence rates. So attendance is an issue. We have lower socioeconomic status. We also have families who may be stricken with instances of incarceration. And there's a list like seven or eight characteristics, high ELL population, high mobility. So a lot of families move in and out of neighbourhoods, and therefore schools, and that creates gaps in their education, et cetera.

Umar Qureshi [00:04:12]:

But in Ontario, we don't have that. We do have labels. So, for example, in York Region, we have priority plus schools. There's a high need for secondary skills program funding or designation in high schools. But overall, if we have a survey of schools in Ontario, boards in Ontario, there's different labels, and those labels mean something different. So that impacts funding, obviously,

the way we look at student programming, student support. So then my question was, well, if I'm walking into a school that's labelled the high need, high priority, et cetera, what is my sort of lens that I would use to operate and support all the moving parts in the building, students programming, instructional practice, setting a vision, et cetera. And if there isn't one set, and let's say I'm in a position where I am allocating funding for something, then how would I allocate funding if I don't have a set criteria for how I would allocate funding? So those are questions and then that I had on my mind.

Umar Qureshi [00:05:19]:

And then you see the real impact in schools. And then that's why I started thinking a little bit more deeply, what does this look like? How do we operationalize this? Or should we, and is there a reason why, maybe. And then the opposite might be true as well, that maybe there's a reason why we don't have a definition so that we can be more flexible in maybe applying funding or support to schools in various boards across the province and part of that is also the equity part is, okay, well, what works for all does work for one, but at the same time, equity looks different for different contexts as well. So how do we operationalize this? And then should we. So then I was just very curious about what the definition looks like and could there be a definition? And then that's why I started digging deeper and here we are.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:08]:

Yeah. So you're saying there are some benefits and maybe some drawbacks to having that kind of a definition or designation?

Umar Qureshi [00:06:16]:

Yeah, it would seem that way, yes.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:19]:

So what is your research then telling you about some effective ways to close the achievement gaps in some of those kinds of contexts, whether it has a definition or not or a designation?

Umar Qureshi [00:06:32]:

Okay. So right now I'm at the point of just proposing my research within my committee and I've come up with a bunch of questions and I'm focusing only on the principal. So when we look at the Ontario Leadership Framework, for example, which is a set of domains that all principals and vice principals operate within, are kind of trained into principal qualification courses, as we know, one of which is, of course, OPC offers. But if we're looking at that framework and we offer it to our principals, we still need something to guide us in school. So what characteristics then, is what I'm looking at? Should a principal or a vice principal have walking into a school in

addition to the PQP courses? Typically they have master's degrees. But is there a curriculum focus, maybe is there more a people focus that would help move students forward, close that achievement gap, ensure equity, ensure mental health supports are in place and the way we go ahead and how do we take that collective responsibility for student success and then also respond to the various types of diversities in the school system, in school building, whether that's at the teacher level, the student level, the support level, and also at the system level as well, people coming into the building to support as well. So those are kind of my curiosities as how do we do this?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:07:58]:

And what does your own experience...are you gleaning from your own experience as a vice principal? Do you have some hints there about what you think is effective? Do you have some thesis there or some ideas that you think might be effective strategies or competencies that a principal would need to have? Or are you kind of keeping this wide open until you see what the results of the research are going to tell you?

Umar Qureshi [00:08:25]:

Yeah, to be fair, I'm keeping it wide open just to be open to all possibilities. But in my personal experience, I'm sure that I'll get surprises. But in my personal experience, just having a very open mind to the possibilities in terms of being innovative or creative to bring solutions to the school, to support students, whatever their needs are. That is one thing, because every student is different. Every set of circumstances are different. So, for example, at my previous school, we had students who came in from Syria when there was that turbulence in that country. But those needs were very different than some of our students who we already had at the school, who are English language learners, for example. So they were struggling to grasp language and learning at the same time the language.

Umar Qureshi [00:09:16]:

But also there are folks who have lower economic status. There were different sets of items that we had to address and support. Then after that wave of refugees that came in, we had refugees that came in from Yemen. Their needs were completely different as well. So there was different types of trauma that they had unfortunately experienced. So we had to address that in a different way. But the way that we helped that particular group of students was completely different than a set of students that came in earlier. But to have that open mind was important. We didn't say, well, we did this last time, A, B and C.

Umar Qureshi [00:09:49]:

It must and should work for this particular group as well. So we have to have that open communication, open-minded approach, because all students are different and the needs are different as well. And we also, in that sense, we had to, I think, be open-minded in learning about others and their experiences as well, and their lived experiences. So if a student is saying, this is what I've experienced, and they're open about it, after we get to know them, build that relationship and the families. But then we had to also kind of have that humility as well that I've never experienced that. I'm very fortunate to have not experienced that. And we, as a collective, never experienced that. So what does that look like? What does that mean to them? And really just think with our heart a little bit more than maybe our brain to just get a sense of what the need is and what we're really looking at.

Umar Qureshi [00:10:37]:

So the context was really interesting, and it was different every time. So just having that open mind was very key to begin with.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:10:47]:

I really like that phrase there, "think with your heart". I think that's a good one. I hope you've trademarked that or something.

Umar Qureshi [00:10:56]:

Well, to be honest, it's a Michael Fullan. It's one of his articles that I read. That part of the work is through your heart as well. So we have to have that there. So it's not, I can't trademark it.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:09]:

But thank you so tell me a little bit about have you gotten to the point where you, like, how are you going to collect your data? Have you got a research design sort of already underway?

Umar Qureshi [00:11:20]:

Through a couple of iterations and quite a few feedback sessions with committee members, supervisors, and just others in the field, I'm looking forward to conducting just semi structured interviews. So there'll be a bunch of questions, as you know. Then the last one is just an open-ended question. And I think part of my theme as well is just if I'm asking and thinking and being open-minded, so I should also be open-minded to offering different avenues and platforms to participants as well. At first, I was going to stick to maybe some of the administrators, just in particular boards, but I noticed that they're all southwestern Ontario. But I'd be interested in what it's like in, let's say, Sudbury or versus Ottawa versus Peel versus Durham. I'm sure there'll be different experiences there. So that's where I'm at right now.

Umar Qureshi [00:12:12]:

I'm just going to have an open call interior wide, see who responds, and I hope many do and just get their experiences and what their thoughts are.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:12:20]:

If you were going to sort of pick one thing from your own experience or from your engagement with this particular topic as you're doing some reading and getting ready to conduct your research there, if there was sort of one thing that you've learned or that you're anticipating from going through the process of doing this research, that one idea that you could share with your colleagues that are listening, that would be a takeaway for them. What might you share with them?

Umar Qureshi [00:12:51]:

Well, I think one of the things that we've been talking a lot about at our board, for example, or even just within Ontario education is just the idea of inclusion, of course, and what success looks like for our students. So I think through Covid, we really learned how our system has laid bare the system inequities. But those inequities weren't necessarily attributed to a particular type of student, for example. Right, like an inner city student as opposed to a suburban student, et cetera. But there are different types of things that also came out from COVID as well. And I'll attribute that to Dr. Lopez at OISE who mentioned that as well. And that's really stuck with me as well.

Umar Qureshi [00:13:37]:

So my question then would be, we have many groups, and within these groups, we have layers, and folks have layers within them in terms of what they're trying to do or in terms of achieving success and barriers that they're facing? What are we doing policy-wise and practice-wise to really support some of these students? So what knowledge, skills and abilities would I then, as an administrator, apply to support students? And then how does that in turn support successful leadership and then leadership? Of course, what we've mentioned here at our school and my previous school as well was that, well, leadership is influence within a group of people at a given time. And I just quote Professor Newman Ashraf at Rotman who said, leadership is impact. So what impact are we having in the moment that we're in with the group of people that we're in? That group of people can include students, can include educators, can include future administrators. And in this particular question you're asking, well, what can we share with other colleagues right now? So my question would be, what purposeful leadership move are we making right now to support our students, to close that achievement gap, but also address some of the systemic inequities that some marginalised groups are facing today? And it doesn't have to be a particular type of student, but it might be something they're experiencing or a

characteristic that they're demonstrating, but that can also change. And again, I'll just say that we need to be open-minded to ensure that impact within the leadership lens.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:15:17]:

Speaking of impact, what are you sort of hoping for? You mentioned the Ontario Leadership Framework. So are you hoping this has some influence on future iterations of the Framework, or what are you hoping for in terms of impact of your research?

Umar Qureshi [00:15:34]:

Well, that's the exciting part, like what comes out of this. So I know there's a lot of conversation, significant conversation, I'll say, in terms of, well, the Ontario Leadership Framework is a fantastic checklist of things that we should be doing. It's been very good for a good amount of time, but now I feel my personal opinion and looking at some of the other research out there, like Dr. Shah at York University has also explored this as well, that we need to add certain domains of equity to the interior leadership framework to sort of refresh it to reflect our current circumstances in our schools. And they're very diverse from when the interior leadership frame came out, maybe, and it's not that old. I mean, it's within 20 years, I believe. But so many things have changed. And of course, the pandemic, which we aren't necessarily trained for, has really changed the way we look at students and really affected students who are marginalised significantly.

Umar Qureshi [00:16:35]:

So when we look at specifically our indigenous population, our students who identify as black, our students who identify as English language learners, and so on and so forth. There's so many characteristics, so their mental health and well-being, their academic achievement. Does this interior leadership framework, does this wonderful guide still support some of the things that we're doing as principals and vice principals in our schools?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:03]:

Well, that sounds like some pretty exciting research, Umar, and some really great opportunities for some potential impact as we think about leadership going forward. Anything else you'd like to share before we kind of close off for today?

Umar Qureshi [00:17:18]:

I think we've covered a lot. I appreciate the opportunity again, but I think we have to understand as well that every day is a new day. Any educator will tell you that any teacher, from, whether they're in kindergarten all the way up to the director level or vice versa, includes everyone, our caretaker and staff, wonderful support people in our school. And they build those

relationships just like any other staff member within the system. But I think we just have to really open our eyes and look at what our realities are in our school and how that affects our climate in our school. What can we do adequately and appropriately in a time sensitive way to support our students? And, of course, intervention is a huge key. It's a huge component of what we do in our schools. But then we're looking out in a way.

Umar Qureshi [00:18:07]:

But we should also look internally as well. We should always be reflective of what we're doing. So when we see instances of low staff morale, for example, or high teacher turnover, which are also characteristic of high need schools, like, okay, well, what's happening in our school at the system level, what's happening in our schools at the policy level? And what does that in turn look like in practice that we need to maybe modify to support current context. Right. And sometimes it's as simple as having a conversation with a family, with a colleague, with a staff member. And sometimes it can be a bigger task where we're pulling in different types of supports to really effectively move stakeholders forward. In terms of leadership, that's what we want to do. We want to move everyone forward.

Umar Qureshi [00:18:51]:

We want to move the system forward, and then really indirectly, we're moving our province forward as well in terms of innovation and skill and knowledge and all the wonderful things that we need to be a visionary in many different ways. Right? Whether it's health or education or IT or the other hands on type of professions out there. Right? But all of it requires education. And the idea of influencing that in a positive way with a consistent framework is what I'm interested in and what we're trying to do at school as well, and ask any student or any professional in the school system and consistency is a huge part of success. We want to identify some of those knowledge, skills and abilities and help each other move forward.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:19:34]:

Well, those are some really powerful questions and some really meaningful work. So I really want to thank you today for sharing your expertise and your story with us. There's lots there for our listeners to consider and to think about as they think about their own work in their own context. So thanks so much for being here today.

Umar Qureshi [00:19:55]:

My pleasure. Thank you so much. Really appreciate your time and the opportunity to share.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:20:01]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the leadership talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:13]:

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