

## EP 20 - Self-regulation

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:12]:

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

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:21]:

Is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:26]:

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 [00:00:44]:

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 [00:01:00]:

Welcome back everyone, to another episode. Really looking forward to today's conversation. Joining us today are Sharlene McHolm and Linda Cotnam from the Waterloo District School Board, and they're here to talk about something that I'm sure all of you will want to lean into. And that is a conversation about self regulation and how we can strategize around supporting positive student behaviours in school. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. So I want to welcome you both, Linda and Sharlene. Before we kind of dive into that topic, I wonder if we could just take a moment for you to introduce yourself and to talk a little bit about your leadership journey. What's brought you to this point? So maybe we could start with Sharlene.

Sharlene McHolm [00:01:50]:

Hi everyone. As Lawrence said, I'm Sharlene McHolm. I'm currently a principal of a seven eight school, but I've been an administrator now for about 20 years. Over that time I've led schools in both panels and in pretty much every kind of configuration and setting that you can imagine here in Ontario. My journey to this topic in particular is both through an academic side. I have a doctorate in education and three master's degrees. But it's more humbling that my learning has come from being a parent of some neurodiverse children where self regulation is a challenge for them. And so I see both sides of the picture for this conversation.

Linda Cotnam [00:02:43]:

So that's me and hi everyone, my name is Linda Cotnam. I have been in education for approximately 30 years and my background has been extensive, just like Sharlene's, in that I've had numerous experiences. So I have taught in both the elementary and secondary panels. I have been a resource teacher in both panels. I've worked in safe schools as a resource teacher and I have now been an administrator for approximately 15 years. With regards to education, I have a diploma in early child daycare management as well as outdoor education and numerous other qualifications that come with education.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:27]:

Well, that's exciting. Welcome to you both. And I know we, you know, have had a prior conversation about today's topic, and I know that both of you have done a lot of research and work in the area of self regulation. And I know that for educators in both panels, as we have moved towards more play based and student directed learning, this natural tension sort of arises between students being able to regulate themselves in the context of directing their own learning or having more agency in their own learning. So I'm wondering if you can just start us off. You know, what is some of your current thinking and some of your current work around this? And maybe we'll start with you this time.

Linda Cotnam [00:04:14]:

Linda, you know, some of my thinking around it is that children are just that they're children, and we're putting them into a setting where there's numerous other children, sometimes 27, 30 children, in a classroom with two educators, sometimes, you know, a third if it is required with respect to educational support. And many of them have different, in varying levels of self regulation, depending where they come from. As every child comes from, you know, a different home with different trials and tribulations, it has a real impact on many of the behaviours, and a lot of the self regulation has to be worked on in order to be successful. And we see it quite often in the primary grades of a school, sometimes older as well. Sharlene, did you want to add to that?

Sharlene McHolm [00:05:13]:

Sure. I guess what I would also say is that when we start with our youngest learners, there is an acceptance at times from the educators in the room and from the parents in the community that this is part of their growth and their development. I think that the tension increases as their little bodies grow, but their skills have not been developed. And I certainly know, as an administrator, the most difficult conversations that I have is often around supporting both the family of the child who struggles with self regulation, but also the families of the other children that are impacted by that self regulation difficulty. And I think, as educators, we need to really understand that they're still just the little people in bigger bodies and approach it with the same compassion and patience that we do when they're missing their two front teeth and they're coming up to only your hip level. So I think that it is a continuum and that the challenges of self regulation are impacting everybody's learning, both the educators and the children of the classroom. And so getting it right is super important.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:47]:  
Linda, did you want to add to that?

Linda Cotnam [00:06:49]:  
Yeah, I just wanted to add to the statement that Sharlene made about the self regulation difficulties, because I think one of the additional difficult moments that we have is that sometimes that self regulation really expresses itself in hands on reactions by a child. And so even though educators are well aware that every child is at their own developmental stage, when a child can't self regulate and reacts by pulling away a toy or pushing someone or I, you know, doing something that no one wants because it's hands on, it, makes it that much more challenging.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:07:32]:  
So there's a few threads I'd like to kind of pull on there from what you both said. One is that I think Sharlene was mentioning, it sounds like there's a developmental kind of component to this, where maybe in junior grades or thereabouts, teachers might expect students to already come with self regulation skills and strategies already kind of firmly in place, and that may not be developmentally appropriate, to expect that all kids will have that in place by that time. So it sounds like these strategies for students need to be sort of scaffolded across the early grades and maybe even beyond into the junior grades, etcetera. So how do we get started? What does that scaffolding look like? Where do we begin?

Sharlene McHolm [00:08:22]:  
I think first and foremost, we begin by getting to know the children. We know that relationship building is essential. And when I say relationship building, I don't just mean with the child themselves, but with their families, because when they come to us, all families have dreams and want their child to be successful. And I think that in many of our children that come from different backgrounds, I can't begin to understand what their lived experience brings to education in general. And I think that we start by building those positive relationships, getting to know the child, getting to know the family, knowing what things the child's interested in and what things really sort of taxes their capacities so that we can be very planful about how we approach situations that are going to be hard for that child. It doesn't matter if the child is four or 14. It's still important for us to know them and to like them and to love them so that they know that even when they have a bad day, that's not representative of who they are. It's a bad moment.

Sharlene McHolm [00:09:50]:  
And so we just reset and we try to sort of find something positive to build on.

Linda Cotnam [00:09:57]:  
I completely agree with Sharlene. I think that relationship piece is vital. Knowing our children, knowing their strengths, their areas to grow, their interests, you know, what motivates them, what might be able to distract them so that you have an opportunity to have them calm and teach self regulation. I think a big part of the scaffolding piece really begins with what's

happening in the classroom. So they're little, they're three and four. So utilising books that show a little person who is dysregulated and maybe strategies they can use, maybe sharing a book about a little kiddo who has such difficulty that it's affecting friendships and what can they do with those relationships and the family relationships. I think having a really big dose of compassion and understanding and asking families questions. I mean, we have little ones who start really early in the morning because of extended day programs.

Linda Cotnam [00:11:08]:

So they're coming in at 07:00 in the morning and not leaving till five. And they're, you know, some of them just turned four. So it's a long day for a little body.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:20]:

I want to ask you about some strategies, like specific strategies in a moment, but maybe I'd like to bring up this kind of issue of co regulation. One of the more difficult conversations that school leaders have with teachers is around helping to equip them to manage these kind of situations appropriately or effectively. So, you know, this idea of co regulation, I think, comes up often. So I wonder if either of you wanted to speak a little bit about that.

Sharlene McHolm [00:11:50]:

It starts with breath and breathing. And one of the things that is so basic to all of us is how we, we mirror what we see. And with little people and even bigger people, just helping them slow their breathing down so that they can take in the environment in a different way is really super important. I also find that, you know, part of the co regulation is sometimes helping them find a strategy that could work for them in that moment. Because sometimes if you say to a child, okay, slow your breathing down, that's not going to work. But if you just sort of take a deep breath in and hold it and then release it, and you just as you're talking to them, you slow the conversation down. I find that that can be super, super helpful because they don't even necessarily know what you're doing. And it becomes a sort of natural thing that they are trying to mirror what you're doing.

Sharlene McHolm [00:13:07]:

And it's about staying calm in that moment when everything else is very busy around you.

Linda Cotnam [00:13:15]:

Even before the co regulating. I think the modeling, the adult modeling is so important. I think as mentioned, children watch. They learn by watching. And so if chaos is resulting in a classroom just because it happens with little bodies and a lot of them, and, you know, some of them come in crying, some of them, you know, are dysregulated in the morning because they had a bad start. You know, maybe there was a argument at home, and watching a teacher themselves just breathe or talk in a low tone, asking them how their day was begins. That intro to co regulation, the way I see it, and I think with co regulation, once you're breathing with them, like she said, breathe in the cake, blow out the candles, let's talk. I think that piece is so vital because many times when they're dysregulated, they don't understand their body and what it's feeling.

Linda Cotnam [00:14:17]:

It could be fatigue, it could be hunger. And so when you're with them asking those questions, saying, oh my, you know, I see you're really upset. Help me understand. I mean, all they want to be is loved, and they just want to know that their need is being taken care of. And so having again that relationship piece and asking those questions and then modelling, let's breathe together and then teaching them, like by doing it with them is a real helpful piece as well.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:14:48]:

Yeah, thanks for that. I think you're right. Modelling is super important, and I think they do pick up a lot of cues from watching us. But both of you did sort of mention that explicit teaching of some of these skills and strategies is also really important for students. So, you know, if a teacher wants to kind of understand, you know, or have some kind of a framework or a resource or something that they can refer to for, you know, what are these skills? What are these strategies? How do I know and where do I find them? What would your recommendation be there?

Linda Cotnam [00:15:21]:

Well, I would start with the four frames of the kindergarten program because they give some clear examples of self regulation. In addition, especially for new educators coming in and if they're having difficulty with it, you know, many, many schools are very fortunate in having resource teachers that they can go to these various manuals that will even have examples of dysregulation and different strategies and ideas and ways to co regulate. I think being a practitioner that is an ongoing learner because we know we're in the field of education, so we hopefully are all continuing to educate ourselves as well is really important. And in many, many boards I know, in ours in particular, there's often different courses or d two I courses that you can take, and we have the personnel that we can go ask as well. People who've been in kindergarten that have taught kindergarten in the past and are now consultants or different things at the board level. So I think there's lots of places where you can begin to understand and figure out different appropriate ways for the kids to grow in that area.

Sharlene McHolm [00:16:37]:

And I guess what I would add is the four frames of kindergarten support well beyond that kindergarten age student. We all know that if you do a quick search on self regulation that there are lots of authors that pop up. We have lots of different research based pieces there that we can dive into. I think the Ontario School mental health website also has a lot of excellent resources because it is a k to twelve resource. Sometimes it's a bit hard to find exactly what you're looking for, but there's lots of resources both for, for educators and administrators could easily use in some of their staff pd that they deliver, as well as things that you can use directly, ready made stuff for the students. So rather than sort of promoting something of a very specific author or program that way, that website certainly is a great collection of things that have been all vetted and equally in English and in French. So it's really a great place to start.

Linda Cotnam [00:17:59]:

I also think the community resources, Sharlene alluded to them, but, you know, these early years programs, we have numerous community resources in the Waterloo, Kitchener area. Kitchener Waterloo area. And I think letting families know about those as well, because when children have dysregulation, it's not just at school, they're dysregulated a lot of the times at home, and often because all families are different, you know, coming all from different places and experiences and personal experiences, they also need to be aware of what they can potentially do to help the child move along in that self regulation journey. Because we're a partnership with the families and working together always benefits the child that much more.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:46]:

That's a great point, Linda, and I'm sure that, you know, if there's some consistency in the language and strategies that you're using at home and using at school, that can be very helpful to, for the student to see that there's some consistency across the places where they spend their time. So that's great. So I'm just looking at the time here, and I know we could spend lots of time unpacking this particular topic, but as you know, we get near the close here today, I'm just wondering if, you know, if there was a key message that you thought was really important for principals and vice principals to kind of take away from today's conversation about self regulation and supporting students in that regard and families, what might that be? Maybe we'll start with you, Linda.

Linda Cotnam [00:19:31]:

I think the biggest message I would have for administrators is that self regulation is not something that we can...I don't want to use the word fix, but make things better right away through lots of oasis or talking it through at that time. It just requires a lot of time. It requires getting to know the child. It requires walking with the child and giving them the tools and the ways to utilise that energy in positive ways. Because little ones, especially when they're not intending to be disruptive or they just want to be happy, they want their adults to love them. They need time. And just knowing that the people in their world are really helping them move along.

Sharlene McHolm [00:20:28]:

And I guess I would build on that. And I would say that children do the very best that they can in the moment and that it's just a moment. So sometimes we get very tired because there's lots of children that are in that moment at the same time. And as school leaders, we too need to make sure that we model what we're wanting our staff to do. So the deep breaths, the patients, giving children a new day or a new afternoon or, and just celebrating the very small steps forward that they make because they are our future and they have so much potential. And I guess I would just say we are so lucky that as administrators, we get to watch that growth over time and we get to see them become the better people, whatever that quote better is for them as they grow into who they're going to be as young adults and leaders in our next generation of schools.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:21:48]:

Well, listen, I really want to thank you both for taking time to be with us today. Those are some really important reminders both for, you know, school administrators and for all educators. I

would say so. Thank you so much, Sharlene and Linda, for being with us today. We really appreciated the conversation.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:22:08]:

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Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:22:21]:

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