

PANEL H – EQUITY FOR NEWCOMER STUDENTS

Podcast Transcript (English)

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

In October of 2023, leaders in equity and human rights from Ontario district school boards, community organizations, academia, and government gathered at Toronto Metropolitan University for a two-day symposium on Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education. The objective was to share promising practices regarding equity-based initiatives, along with creating space to reflect on and commit to greater action in support of enhanced equity for elementary school students.

We are honoured to bring you some of the many conversations that took place before, during, and after the 2023 Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education symposium. My name is Nicholas Ng-A-Fook from the University of Ottawa, and this episode spotlights the key messages that were shared by presenters in a panel discussion focused on equity for newcomer students. We were fortunate enough to have four amazing panelists whose voices will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Hortense Mvuemba, who is the Community Engagement Advisor at the Conseil des Écoles Catholiques du Centre-Est.
- Étienne Parenteau who is the Director of Student Health, Safety, and Well-being Director at the Conseil de Écoles Catholiques du Centre-Est.
- Sita Jayaraman who is the Senior Manager, Human Rights and Equity Officer, Halton Catholic District School Board.
- And Malini Singh who is the Manager of Newcomer Support Services at The Neighbourhood Organization.

These panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question asked them to share their experiences and ideas on promising approaches to enhancing equity for newcomer students in elementary schools, as well as any specific resources or practices. Malini, Hortense, and Étienne shared numerous equity initiatives taking place at the school boards where they work.

Malini Singh:

- Some practical, promising practices to support newcomers, it's a thoughtful and it's an inclusive approach. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity is most welcome. Creating a classroom environment that respects and values students' diverse cultural backgrounds is key. Incorporating multicultural perspectives into the curriculum to promote understanding and appreciating of different cultures. English language support (ESL) programs or (ELD) English Language Development classes, using bilingual resources and materials when available, will bridge these language gaps. One other notable is the small group instruction. Offering small group instruction to address individual learning needs and providing that targeted support for language acquisition and academic skills. Visual aids, hands-on learning obviously are all essential.

- I manage a unique program called the Settlement and Education Partnership in Toronto, mentioned just before. It's a SWIS program: Settlement Workers In Schools, since 1999. This is one of Immigration, Refugee and Canadian and Citizenship Canada's premier programs that they've started since 1999, placing settlement workers in schools to address the needs of newcomers. Settlement Workers in Schools - currently, because we're Toronto-based, we're in the TDSB and the TCDSB and we aim to provide settlement services through newcomers language-based placed in specific schools that have large populations of newcomers.
- To meet the case management goals and address needs of the families, we would meet individually with families and provide them with anything from Canadian education and school system, talking about grad requirements, guidance, support, mental health supports in the school and then of course larger such as housing, employment, citizenship and immigration, mental health services. In addition to that, we do a lot of group sessions, and group sessions support elementary students, homework clubs, English conversation. As well, we have certain workshops like dressing for winter. When newcomers come to Canada, they don't know how to dress for winter per se unless they're from a different climate. And then we have specialized groups as well. Afghan Girls group. We now have a Ukrainians men's group that we're working with for different needs. Notable to our program as well, and I think mentioned everywhere, cultural competency training and supporting and addressing the needs for newcomers through school staff.

Hortense Mvuemba (*Translated from French*):

- We now have an admission center. It's new, it's been around since 2019. We said to ourselves, we want to have a center, a one-stop shop where we can welcome these families with kindness, give them a warm welcome, and be able to meet their needs. So at the CAA, I am part of the CAA, the reception center. When we welcome a family, there are certain things we need to know first. We register the children, and there is a whole roadmap that we have to follow. We welcome the families. We welcome their children on site and register them. The children have to undergo an assessment because all children who come to Ottawa, who are enrolled in our schools and who come from abroad, have to undergo an assessment. We want to determine whether the student needs help before they start school so that we can give them the support they need, often through the support program.
- Newcomers, the PANA program or the French language upgrading program¹. So that's it. And we also explain each step of the registration process to parents, explaining what we do, why we do it, why we do the assessments. And so, as I said at the beginning, it's a new school system we're trying. We

¹ As of 2025, according to the Ministry of Education, the PANA (Programme d'appui pour les nouveaux arrivants [Support Program for Newcomers]) and the ALF (Actualisation de la langue française [French Language Upgrading]) programs have been removed from the curriculum.

take the time to explain to parents the Council's website, because now, what I forgot to tell you about the action reception center, all registrations are done online. So there are parents who don't have a computer at home, so it's always good when they come to the reception center to do it, or even if they have a computer at home. Sometimes they have difficulty registering online and they always ask for our help. So when they're here at the CAA, we take the opportunity to explain the school calendar and the school board's website to them so that they can also familiarize themselves with the system and learn about their children's school, the six-year-olds, one or two children.

- For example, at the elementary level, many parents ask me the same question: I don't know how to pack a lunch box. What should I put in my child's lunch box? So, with community services, our partners, community nutritionists, we organize workshops. The workshops are held at school or in a grocery store where parents, with the help of a dietitian, can learn about food and its nutritional value. And then, what should I put in the lunch box? Everything that is protein and everything that is carbohydrates, so the dietitian takes the time to explain these workshops to them. As I said, they can take place either at school or in grocery stores. And what's also great about these workshops is that we invite children to join in and make recipes together with their parents. We want students to see how they can get hungry during these workshops. Other workshops, for example, how to navigate the portal per year? It's a communication tool that we use often. How do you access the online store? As part of the work we do, we explain all this to parents. Then there are also parents who are often concerned about everything related to discipline, everything related to child welfare, the child welfare society. And I have many parents who come here to Canada and ask me, excuse me, I heard that here, sometimes, they can take your children away, how does that work? So often, to alleviate these fears, what I do is organize workshops with the child welfare agency to really explain to them how it works and how to adopt positive discipline.

Étienne Parenteau (*Translated from French*):

- We also have awards for allies or allies of the year, which are given to students or staff members who have demonstrated effort, courage, and dedication in fighting all forms of discrimination in schools and services. We often talk about schools, but we also talk more about services. We also have an inclusion scholarship for 12th-grade students, so we target a student who has once again shown courage in fighting discrimination, regardless of historically marginalized groups.
- We also have a reporting tool to ensure that there is a mechanism in place to report any hateful or discriminatory comments or actions that occur in schools.

So right now, it's in high schools, but it will soon be introduced in elementary schools as well, where we want students, parents, and members of the community to be able to inform members of management about these comments and actions.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

It is fascinating how the panelists indirectly touched on many issues faced by newcomer families while describing these support programs. It is not only a new education system that they are trying to navigate, but a new country with different customs, climate, culture, and language. That being said, in trying to consider all the ways in which they may need support, it is critical to remember the diverse and rich lived experiences and assets they bring with them. Sita describes the value of adopting an asset-based approach.

Sita Jayaraman:

- So, I wanted to sort of highlight three big pictures in terms of ideologically, where are we going as a board, and then try to link that up to different examples that exemplify that within the school board. So, the first is really sort of taking an asset-based framework, particularly when it comes to newcomer students. Sometimes there's a notion that, you know, they're blank slates coming to schools to be filled with knowledge. But I really wanted to highlight the understanding, and within our board as well, that newcomer students come to us with a robust range of experiences, knowledge, ways of doing things. And that we really need to honour that and build on that in order to be able to support and advance equity for newcomer students. So, this asset-based framework is really important. And one of the examples I wanted to give for that we've been focusing on as a board for the last couple of years, is the notion of translanguaging, which really means purposefully using languages other than English within the school and classroom community, so that students can see their own identities reflected. So, it could be something as simple as having welcome signs in different languages, to, being in a catholic school board, mornings are opened with prayer, so, we encourage students to start with a prayer in a language that they're comfortable with. So really inviting the language into the school. Or, what we've also been trying is recognizing that language may be a barrier for newcomer students, again, it's not a barrier for all newcomer students, it may be a barrier, but the ability to think critically, reflect critically, already exists in the language that they may be coming to the school with. So, teachers encourage students to maybe create their first rough draft or their first assignment in a language that they are comfortable with. So, they can use those critical thinking skills to develop the assignment. And then help them translate into different languages. Again, it's about building on what students have to be able to advance equity.
- The second piece, and I know this has been mentioned a couple of times, but I think it's really important to bear in mind, is the understanding and the constant reminder that newcomer students are not a monolith, right? So even when we look at students, whether they're coming from a particular part of the

world, their experiences are going to be very different based on so many other factors, whether it's ability, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, length of time, family circumstances. So, we cannot have a one size fit strategy. That is doomed to fail. So, we really need to look at understanding the whole child. And look at what other aspects of that child's identity do we need to be cognizant of as we provide supports to that child, right?

- The last one that I want to mention in terms of ideological approach is that newcomer students and families have the solutions. They know what they need, and it's important for us as school boards to be able to co-create those solutions, keeping student voice at the center. So, one of the examples of that that I want to mention is that we partnered up with McMaster University to really understand and center the voices of students from the Philippines who've come to Halton under the Live-in Caregiver program. And we found that, anecdotally, we knew that their experiences, their challenges were vastly different from students from the Philippines who came under different entry points through different programs within the immigration context. So, doing that research, working with families, working with students who came under the Live-in Caregiver program, we were really able to understand, what are their unique challenges? What do they see as engagement, what do their families see as importance in terms of pathway planning? So, through that sort of student-centered approach and understanding that, we were able to co-create solutions that were, again, specific to communities that we knew had special needs, or had specific needs within our system.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

It is important to keep in mind what Sita describes as a strengths-based framework when working with all equity-deserving groups. In particular, language comes up often in this discussion about newcomer students as this is often a barrier for most of these families.

Hortense Mvuemba (*Translated from French*):

- Let's say, for me, in relation to the families we welcome, you must first know that these families come from different cultures and different backgrounds. And with the dream of providing the best quality education for their children. And the other thing is that our schools are French-speaking. The parents speak French, but there are many parents who come to us who speak neither French nor English, so they are allophone families. So we have to serve them. Another thing is that these families come without a social network or sometimes even without family, meaning they don't have anyone already here in Canada to welcome them or any friends, so they come into the unknown, into a new country, because that was my case. Personally, I think we also need to take care of these families. As I said, there's the language barrier, and then the other thing is that the challenge is that they come here and have to familiarize themselves with a new education system, namely French-language education.

- It's a new school system we're trying out, and we're taking the time to explain to parents that it's the Council's website, because now, what I forgot to tell you about the action center, all registrations are done online. Some parents don't have a computer at home, so it's always good when they come to the reception center to do it, or even if they do have a computer at home. Sometimes they have trouble registering online and they always ask for our help. So when they're at the CAA, we take the opportunity to explain the school calendar and the school board's website to them so that they can also familiarize themselves with the system.
- Francophones come in, they don't speak English well, so they want to learn English, so we tell them what steps to take. For example, if they need housing, we refer them to the necessary resources, in general. They need, as I said, housing or a health card, so we refer them to other resources they need to facilitate their integration.
- There are settlement workers who are there, as I said before, settlement workers who speak several languages. I said before that there are families who come to us who don't speak French, who speak perhaps only their mother tongue. Settlement workers help us a lot in this regard, especially with translation and also to facilitate communication.

Sita Jayaraman:

- So even in things like how we think of sending students, newcomer students for language assessment, it should not be an automatic 'oh, you're from here, from another country. You're automatically being sent for language assessment'. No, we're going to have to dig deeper to say, what is your home language? What languages have you, and many of our newcomer students speak multiple languages, so, what is the home language? And that might be different from the language which they have learned or gone to school in, or learned, a medium of instruction. So, we really need to be able to dig deeper before we automatically send students off for assessments. So, we've sort of even changed our language around, first language versus home language versus medium of instruction, so that we're not making any assumptions from that deficit lens of oh, newcomer? Must be requiring English language supports.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

While language proficiency can be a common challenge faced by newcomer students, panelists also discussed other potential challenges such as building a social network, financial stress, mental health, learning and parental engagement.

Malini Singh:

- We have a lot of students that have not been in school. They have academic gaps for many reasons. They've been in refugee camps for a few years of their educational life, so they don't understand the differences that we have in Canada. Transcripts, these kinds of things are not available if you are moving from different countries, if you've migrated and had to go through several countries just to get to Canada, these are some challenges. Bullying, discrimination. The large one that we see is financial stress. Newcomer families face financial challenges, this is the data. And it results in students experiencing food insecurity and unstable housing situations. And without food, it's very hard to be productive in school.
- We also talk about language barriers, cultural adjustments. Trauma is the largest one for us because we are continuously seeing newcomer students that are experiencing migration or conflict, displacement and trauma.

Sita Jayaraman:

- The other piece that I want to talk about and highlight too, actually, when it comes to newcomer students, is one that often the focus is on academic achievement. But I think it's equally important to focus on mental health and culturally responsive and relevant mental health for newcomer students, right? So academically, they might still be doing well, whether you pin it on the myth of meritocracy or home countries where there's such an emphasis on education, but mentally, mental health, how is the student doing? I think that is something that we really need to focus on and something that sometimes slips through the cracks because we're focusing more on grades and looking at supporting students.
- I think it's important for school boards to look at intentionally building solidarity across different equity deserving groups. We cannot talk about advancing equity for newcomer students without talking about advancing equity for students with disabilities, students from the 2SLGBTQIA community, students who are black, racialized. But it is building that solidarity across different equity groups, equity-deserving groups, which can sometimes, I think, which is what we're called to do, so that we can approach this in a way that we understand that all oppressions are interlinked and that we cannot address issues in silos.

Étienne Parenteau (*Translated from French*):

- It's always a challenge to reach parents. We have a website that allows parents to find out about systemic activities and all our systemic initiatives in addition to what is available in all schools, so obviously, a lot is being done. We want to highlight the good work that is being done, and we do this through various communications. We talk a lot about students. We talk a lot about parents, but we also need to equip the staff. And then the staff, as we've been discussing for the past two days, is really crucial in terms of their involvement

with the students, so we try to give them the necessary resources, the necessary tools, and the necessary training to be able to address sensitive topics, I hope. I hope that eventually, we'll talk more about sensitive topics, that we'll talk about current events. But even today, we really need to be able to support people.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

Discussing these various challenges allowed the panelists to highlight some key approaches that can be used when working with newcomer students to improve equity for them in the future in the education system. Common themes are centring the voices and experiences of those whom we are trying to support, using tailored support as much as possible, educating our educators, and finally, building strong community partnerships.

Malini Singh:

- Equality might assume that a standardized approach is fair for everyone regardless of their circumstances. But this approach can overlook newcomer students, their unique challenges, requirements, as they need additional support due to language barriers, cultural adaptation and other factors. When we look at equity, we are aiming to level the playing field by addressing disparities within the boards. An individualized approach where newcomer students of diverse backgrounds and circumstances seeks to remove those barriers that will hinder their success.

Sita Jayaraman:

- When we think about supporting any kind of equity deserving group, it's not about fixing the students, giving them more supports, giving them more tutoring supports. It's about fundamentally looking at how is the education system set up, who is it set up to succeed and who is not represented?

Malini Singh:

- When we look at equity in education, we are talking, you know, equity for newcomers in elementary schools, cultural sensitivity is key. Equity acknowledges and respects the diverse cultural backgrounds of newcomer students. It ensures that the curriculum and the classroom environment are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and free from discrimination and bias. And wanted to mention there too, family and community engagement. Actively involving families and communities of newcomer students in the educational process. This engagement will help to build the gap and provide a supportive network for students.

Sita Jayaraman:

- Really I think about, what is our job as educators in the education system? It's not to just teach skills, but to teach students to know, validate and celebrate

who they are. Right? So, if we keep that as the foundation of doing the work of equity, whether it's newcomer students, whether it's other families, I think that will serve us well when we think about approaches.

- School boards cannot do this work on their own. We must intentionally seek out partnerships with community organizations, be it settlement agencies, be it ethno-specific agencies, because these agencies bring a specialized knowledge, understanding, rootedness in the community that school boards do not have because we've become sort of insular. So, I think it's important for us to build those relationships and be able to advance equity for newcomer students. That's one important piece that I wanted to mention.

Étienne Parenteau (*Translated from French*):

- We have a partnership with the University of Ottawa. And then the University of Ottawa informs us, our staff. This fall, we had a training session called "How to Provide Anti-Racist Mental Health Care," which all of our social workers received at the Council. Some schools will also participate in training, both staff and students, on how to become anti-racist, not just anti-racism but anti-racist. So these are all training courses that we offer to staff to really support their work. And we know that well-supported teaching staff will then be able to help students more and also answer questions from parents.

Malini Singh:

- Fostering partnerships with community organizations and collaborating with government bodies and settlement organizations to ensure equity consideration should be integrated into policy decision. And then I wanted to mention about the PLCs. I think the PLCs are just amazing where educators can share best practices and strategies to promote equity, providing resources and support for educators to implement equity focused initiatives in their classrooms. And then by implementing it, there will be a leadership commitment, if it's ongoing, which will support newcomers in the future. Ongoing professional development, parent and community engagement, it can't be stressed enough to involve parents and community members in the PLC process where appropriate, seeking their input and insights into improving their children's outcomes. And then sharing the results. Share the results with community partners, all the stakeholders have open communication around it, so that the broader community can build support and create sustainability and a long-term commitment.

Hortense Mvuemba (*Translated from French*):

- And then the other thing I explain to parents is that they will find allies at school in the form of what are commonly referred to as "settlements work at school." They are very important because they are placed in schools and their role is really to help families and their children who are in school to integrate into the school, but also into the community. So, we put them in place before a

parent can have access to a settlement worker, and above all, it's a job. It's a T-E. Settlement workers in schools are called T-E's. They are our partners, they are, how shall I put it, managed by a community partner. Before a parent can access settlement workers, they must first sign a consent form agreeing that a settlement worker will be able to work with them. So it's not the teacher, but someone else, it's a service, but an external service, so there's that.

Étienne Parenteau (*Translated from French*):

- We target one person per school who becomes an ally for the equity and inclusive education team in order to build the system's capacity to quickly gain their support in schools for other Board initiatives. We have a diversity mentoring program for new school staff, mainly teachers who have obtained their high school diploma or other credentials abroad. There is a mentoring system for these individuals. They are accompanied by experienced teachers from the Board, which once again helps to build capacity and respond to different realities.

Hortense Mvuemba (*Translated from French*):

- So, the people who take care of the teachers there are my allies, the people I work with. But why do I work so much with what... And the first thing is that they have to understand each other. I work in the sense that they have to understand the overall needs of the students entrusted to them, these students who come from elsewhere. They have needs, they come from our culture. So, and they're not difficult, they need Canada for them, well, let's say. The city where they are is completely new, so it's a new environment. And for the teacher too, it's new for, let's say, teachers in general. These are students who welcome them but who come from other backgrounds, who have other cultures. So, to help them understand the culture of the students entrusted to them. And I often suggest organizing workshops on cultural skills because that also makes it easier for them. And then you also need to know how to facilitate communication.

Malini Singh:

- When we look at stakeholders, it's really the policies and the legislation that promote equity in education as we know. One thing I would mention is the teacher professional development - investing in professional development programs for teachers that focus on cultural competency, diversity and inclusion. Encourage educators to reflect on their biases and how they might impact their teaching practices. Offer cultural competency training for all educational stakeholders, all of them to understand better and address the unique needs of diverse student populations. We talked about curriculum and

materials - review, update and include diverse perspective, histories and culturally relevant inclusive matter.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

There is a strong message of collaboration and working together shared by panelists in this episode. Moreover, the themes of acceptance, recognition, and openness to learning really come to surface when reflecting on promising practices toward enhancing equity for newcomer students.

And with that, we're going to wrap up this episode with a wonderful quote shared by Sita during her presentation. This is a quote from Stephanie Marshall, and it reads: *"Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies, it creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation."*

Sita Jayaraman:

[Regarding the quote, "Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies, it creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation." - Stephanie Marshall]

- And last, not least, I wanted to leave you with this quote again, because I think when we think about equity, it's about transforming systems, systems of education, and not focusing on how we can fix kids or how we can just focus on the students without internally reflecting on how we can transform systems.

Host (Nicholas Ng-A-Fook):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Étienne Parenteau, Hortense Mvuemba, Malini Singh, and Sita Jayaraman, for sharing with us.

Thanks also to Stephen Hurley, founder and chief catalyst at VoiceEd Radio for your support of podcast development.

For more from the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium, be sure to visit VoiceEd.ca, or wherever you get your favourite podcasts. I'm Nicholas Ng-A-Fook. Thank you for joining us.