

PANEL A – EQUITY FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Podcast Transcript

Host (Sejal Patel):

In October 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 honored 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 Sejal Patel, Associate Professor and Director in Early Childhood Studies, Faculty of Community Services, at Toronto Metropolitan University, and this episode spotlights the key messages that were shared by four amazing presenters in a panel discussion focused on equity for Black students. Panelists featured in this episode include:

- Karen Murray, who is the System superintendent of Equity, Anti-Oppression and Early Years at the Toronto District School Board
- Raquel Walker, who is the Coordinating Principal of African, Black, and Afro-Caribbean Student Success at the Peel District School Board
- And Kearie Daniel along with Charline Grant, who are representatives of the community organization, Parents of Black Children

These four 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 Black students in elementary schools, as well as any specific resources or practices. Karen kicked off the conversation by asking some important questions.

Karen Murray:

- I know that affirmation, belonging, and well-being of Black students are critical as a promising practice. And it's easy to be said, and it's written in many places. So I thought, what does that look like? What do I know? I know that in many of the initiatives that I've been engaged in over a very long time, we have to create those conditions in schools. Intentionally create those conditions, because if Black families and Black students can't see themselves in the school, in the curriculum, in spaces in which they go every single day, then we're not engaging in a promising practice.
- I'm very, very proud of our Center of Excellence for Black Student Achievement. That's an affinity space, and it is the first publicly funded affinity space, but it should not stand alone. So what is needed? How do we build spaces where Black families, staff, and students, as well as their families and

community, feel that they have opportunity to achieve all the things they want from us, that they keep coming to us as districts in order to provide? How do we become accountable?

- They talk about centering Black student voices. I'll tell you, when we've done it, we've done amazing jobs in schools. When we've asked, what do you need? When we say, what is not working for you? Families and students could give us the recommendation and suggestions

Host (Sejal Patel):

Karen's emphasis on engaging students, families, and communities in the process of making our schools safer spaces to enhance equity for Black students is a recurring theme not only in this episode, but throughout the whole symposium, as a key approach to supporting individuals from historically marginalized communities. Raquel expanded on how stakeholder engagement led to important developments in the Peel District School Board.

Raquel Walker:

- So at Peel, we collaborated with various stakeholders to create our We Rise Together 2.0 Black Student success Strategy.
- This strategy is a five year strategy, it has eight guiding principles, six focus areas, an accountability framework, and specific measures of progress in different priority areas such as human rights, well being, hiring, pathways and achievement for Black students.
- We don't want the strategy to remain a document on a shelf, electronically or physically. So through our School Improvement and Equity Planning process, which we call our SIEP process, each school is required to articulate a goal that aligns with the Black student success strategy. And when devising an action plan to implement that goal, schools are encouraged to reflect on questions to help them determine the what. So, what will this goal look like and sound like for Black students? What will it look like and sound like to staff if they're improving outcomes for Black students? What changes will occur for Black students as a result of the work? And what will we measure to know that we're on track? And so, in engaging in the school improvement process, we also need to audit the work in a meaningful way. So, we have our School Equity Audit Tool, which is our SEAT. So yes, we have a SIEP and we have a SEAT.
- The SEAT allows educators to identify evidence in various areas, such as interrogating the critical frameworks that they're using. What are they doing to ensure well being for Black students? How are they designing learning environments? What curriculum are they choosing, and their text selection. So, by using the audit tool and through our school improvement process, schools can engage in numerous opportunities for equity-oriented problem

solving within a race conscious inquiry cycle. And so, our school improvement process and our audit tool, they help us understand the *what*.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Having school boards develop and implement a School Improvement and Equity Planning process along with a School Equity Audit Tool, similar to what Raquel described, can be very impactful when working to enhance equity for all students because of the support and the guidelines that are being made available. However, as another presenter, Kearie, explains, the work can be done, even without these school board resources.

Kearie Danie:

- The classroom space belongs to the educator. You don't have to wait for your board to direct you to do this work. You can create and facilitate a space within your classroom that is engaging for students, that is a representative space, and that's on you.
- You have a curriculum that is standard, but how are you tailoring that? What are you injecting in that? When you're learning about explorers of early Canada, what else are you layering on top of that to be representative of Black Canadians, of the Indigenous experience? So all of those things are within the hands of educators. You don't need to wait for anyone to do that. And I would say that, where we see those promising practices, it's when educators are really leaned into creating those spaces.
- Parents of Black children, a couple of years ago, put out a toolkit called 'A Simple Request', which is really a booklet, a guide, for educators, administrators across this province on how to engage with Black families, how to support Black students.

Host (Sejal Patel):

The potential of each individual to take the lead on enhancing equity is underscored by the wonderful work of the organization, Parents of Black Children. As Kearie shared, the toolkit titled 'A Simple Request' is available online at the parents of Black children website and is a helpful resource to explore. Raquel highlights the importance of considering this work as an ongoing process.

Raquel Walker:

- And I'd say we're at the point now in Peel where many educators can articulate the *what*, many can articulate the *why*, but it's the *how*, right? They often ask us, well, *how* do we do this work? And really, that's an ongoing process. Achieving equity is not a destination, it's a journey. And so, working through that school improvement planning process and with our ongoing auditing of the work that we're doing, we'll keep the momentum going to

improve outcomes for Black students. Traditional school improvement processes that look at improving teacher practice might have opportunities for moderated assessment, but we know in Peel that to have more accurate representation of how students are achieving, we have to look at that triangulated evidence, and we have to hear directly from students. So, we use street data as one of our mentor texts, which help educators develop that critical data literacy that's important to ensure that they're gathering meaningful evidence of impact at the student level. And so, in addition to identifying specific goals and outcomes, we have to also be intentional about how we're creating identity affirming spaces in and outside of the classroom for Black students' success. Throughout the year, we provide opportunities for Black students to participate in Afrocentric programs. For example, we have an Agents 4 Social Change March break camp and summer program. And a key component to the success of those programs is the partnerships that we have with the community and people from the community. They come in and they teach the children, which is important for Black students, to see people that look like them in a teaching capacity that they're maybe not accustomed to.

- There are also many schools that have Black Student Associations, or BSAs, that provide identity affirming, culturally relevant opportunities for Black students. And those groups are student led, student centered, student driven, and they provide opportunities for mentorship and leadership. We also have many schools with Black parent advisory groups, and those function to represent the voice of families that have Black children. They create supportive networks to help families better understand and navigate the system. They help to plan and carry out identity affirming events, yes, during Black history month, but also to showcase Black excellence throughout the year. And we've been hearing much now about families wanting to be able to support their children in very specific and purposeful ways around literacy and numeracy development. And many of those Black parents and caregivers sit on those school improvement equity planning committees at the school level. So we also have a network of Black studies educators that started as a group of teachers committed to embedding the experiences of Black Canadians in the curriculum at the high school level. And this past summer, a group of teachers got together to create lessons so that the same could be done at the elementary level.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Our panelists have shared numerous promising practices for advancing equity for Black students, ranging from Board-led initiatives to parent-developed resources, to educators' efforts in their own classrooms, such as through implementing student-centered activities.

It is important to recognize the challenges that can arise when working to enhance equity. Talking about these obstacles can provide a helpful space for learning from

one another, as well as leaning on one another. Charline and Kearie tackle this topic from the key perspective of parents and families.

Charline Grant:

- And so the challenges we face, we face many challenges, when we go in to advocate for our Black students. When advocacy shows up with families, the way we approach the work is usually a criticism. But there's no other way for us to show up in the way that we do, because our children's lives depend on it. Our children are being abused in the system, physically, mentally, emotionally, every single day. We won't even get into the data right now, but they are. So when we show up, we are the equalizer. We're leveling the playing field and the imbalance of power that our parents face. So the pushback that we get is severe, and that in itself is violence towards us.
- So one of the worst things you could do when parents show up with their advocates or show up on themselves is police that work. Police how they show up or how they want to advocate for their children. How they want to advocate for the survival of their children.
- So when we show up, and you decide to police us, we are showing up with centuries, decades of pain, hurt, and trauma that has never been addressed or even acknowledged. So we are going to come differently.
- And we're hearing and our voice are being muted or we're being refused and denied a seat at the table. We take that personally. And for us, it is personal, because we don't only show up as advocates. We show up as parents of Black children ourselves.

Kearie Daniel:

- We see often parents who have to quit their jobs because they are involved in their child's life, because the school is calling them all the time, they have to be present, and the school is set up so that you're having these meetings within certain times, within certain days, and parents have to take time off work. That's not sustainable. And for many families who are navigating so many different aspects of life, that's not a way to engage them
- The Afrocentric approach is to engage everyone, from granny, auntie, everybody, right, uncles. And that's the approach that we needed. Schools are too often seen as this barrier. And for centuries, that's the way schools have been created. They take our kids, they're in this building, and the building is a barrier for our families. And we hear often about, we need parents to be involved. And there's a difference between being involved and being engaged, right? So an involved parent may have the time to go to the school and go on classroom trips and things like that, but an engaged parent will take the extra step, right? They're going to go and be part of decision making. So they have those opportunities to be part of decision making.

Host (Sejal Patel):

The challenges shared by Charline and Kearie as parents of Black children illustrate the presence of anti-Black racism in our schools, and the importance of getting everyone in the education system to not only recognize it, but to address it. Karen and Raquel elaborate on these systemic challenges.

Karen Murray:

- The challenges we faced is, one, really working with our staff and leaders and equipping them to be able to notice, name, address, anti-Black racism. How do we make them notice and name? Because they can't eliminate barriers without that.

Raquel Walker:

- Inevitably, when you're working to enhance equity, there will be challenges, right? Because we're disrupting the status quo. And so not unique to Peel, we see the equity detours. Those are the excuses that people make to not engage in the work. People say they don't have enough time, they don't have enough resources. They say they don't see colour. And then there's the perpetual *why*? Why this, why now? Why them, right? And without an understanding of the issues, equity will remain a moving target. The education system, it's not neutral. Anti-Black racism does exist, and if people believe that it is a fairy tale, it will never fully be addressed.
- As an administrator, I hear much about lack of accountability or poor accountability. It's difficult, yes, to manage various employee groups, so that's something that is always kind of part of the conversation, right? How do we ensure that we're securing accountability?

Host (Sejal Patel):

This question about accountability brings us to the important conversation on what actions can be taken by education stakeholders in enhancing equity. While there is work that can be done at the individual- and collective-levels, accountability measures at the system-level can have a positive impact on school communities. For example, Raquel describes a framework used at her school board, as well as other equity initiatives.

Raquel Walker:

- And then at Peel, we have another framework, which is our Empowering Modern Learners Framework, which helps educators with the *why*. So, a fundamental belief of this framework is that we are accountable to actively

identify, disrupt, and dismantle inequities and oppression, so learners of all identities are empowered through education that embraces their identities and lived experiences. This Empowering Modern Learners Framework provides guidance around the implementation of innovative elements such as learning culture, equitable assessment, access to tech and tools, and global competencies that can also be monitored through our school improvement planning process.

- What actions can be taken by stakeholders to enhance equity for Black students? Well, having dedicated staff such as myself, I have a team of educators that I work with. I also work with our graduation coaches. Definitely helps to advance the work, but also looking at the structural pieces. So, African centered approaches that utilize principles of mutual respect, spirituality and shared responsibility. African centered approaches that value the development and societal contributions of young people. That gives us a framework for engaging in educational pursuits in a way that's more equitable and just. So, Bettina Love, Bell Hooks, Chris Emdin and other folks. They speak about school as being liberatory spaces, spaces that center student and community voice. And as George Dei says, we need to break down the false separation between home and school. And, in fact, that separation only exists because we, the system, put it there. Imagine what schooling would be like without it. But we also need to go beyond reimagining school, and we need to reimagine teacher training programs. Preparing future teachers in these non-Eurocentric and liberatory approaches is key for a more equitable school system.
- So we need to focus on fixing the structural problems that uphold anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression. We should identify the intersections within equity work, rather than get involved in the competing interest argument, which stalls advancing equity for Black students.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Raquel reminds us of the importance of focusing on addressing the structural barriers that uphold anti-Black racism. All panelists pointed out the need for individual reflection, not only to interrogate our own biases, but also to reflect on how the status quo is inherently unjust. Karen invites us to consider some key questions.

Karen Murray:

- I want us to begin by thinking about, why are you here? What is your purpose for being here, and what do you want to take away? And as we all engage in the work that we do, and talking about the work that we do, and talking about the things that we feel are important, I want you to think about, so what does this mean for you?
- What should stakeholders take away and be able to do? One, how are you building your awareness, knowledge, so that you can engage in action and

decision making that actually makes sense and actually is impactful for Black students and their families?

- How are we using community and community educators and community leaders to support us in extending, expanding and enhancing the experiences of Black students in schools?
- I think what is most important is this: what you don't know, you need to go find out. You can't rely on the people in this body to fix a system that we did not create. How can we become allies to the work? Then, don't be an ally. Just help us do the work. And I think that is the most important way we can change academic success for Black students in this province.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Concluding thoughts from Kearie and Raquel continue to emphasize the call for education systems to change, and the powerful idea that honouring human rights, equity and inclusion is important and beneficial for society as a collective whole.

Kearie Daniel:

- So education needs to change, just period. The education system, like so many of our systems, was created centuries ago and hasn't changed. We teach the same way, right? We're teaching the same, in many cases, the same curriculum, the same book. But there are different tools. We have technology at our fingertips. There's virtual reality. So many ways to engage students, to reach our kids that we need to think about and consider.

Raquel Walker:

- And this process doesn't just benefit Black students, it addresses an unjust education system that impacts us all. So, as Lilla Watson said, if you've come here to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Karen Murray, Raquel Walker, Kearie Daniel, and Charline Grant for sharing with us.

Thanks also to Stephen Hurley, founder and chief catalyst at VoicEd Radio for your support of podcast development. For more from the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium, be sure to visit VoicEd.ca or wherever you get your favourite podcasts. I'm Sejal Patel. Thank you for joining us.