

**PANEL B – EQUITY FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE BLACK, INDIGENOUS,
AND PEOPLE OF COLOUR (BIPOC)
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 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 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 presenters in a panel discussion focused on equity for students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. We were fortunate to have four amazing panelists whose voices will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda and Micheline Limoges are both from the Conseil Scolaire Catholique Providence. Melissa is the Human Rights and Equity Advisor and Micheline is the Superintendent of Education-Equity and Inclusive Education,
- Jacqueline Lawrence is the Superintendent of Equity, Anti-Oppression and Early Years at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
- and Neethan Shan is the Executive Director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations.

These panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question invited panelists to share their experiences and ideas on promising approaches to enhancing equity for students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in elementary schools, as well as any specific resources or practices. To begin, Jacqueline frames the challenge of equity work using the two-fold meaning of the acronym V-U-C-A as both Volatile but with Vision, Uncertainty but with Understanding, Complexity but with Clarity, and Ambiguity but with Agility.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- For those of you who don't know what a VUCA world refers to, VUCA is seeing the world through that lens of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. There's also a flip side of this, in terms of VUCA also meaning Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Agility. And what we're shaping in our district is an understanding that in order to build that bridge between Volatility

and Vision, we need to be creating discrimination free, inclusive, and equitable spaces of learning and working.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Creating discrimination free and inclusive spaces to enhance equity for students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour is key. Next, Melissa and Micheline describe the work that is taking place at the Conseil Scolaire Catholique Providence.

Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda & Micheline Limoges

- **[ML]** So, our school board strategic plan, after many consultations with our communities, spoke very loudly for equity to be included explicitly within our strategic plan. And so, two out of the three axes reflect that need for students and as well as staff for hiring. **[MJBV]** One of the important things about having it embedded in our strategic plan is that all of our procedures, our policies, everything is being reviewed under that lens. So, I'm able to go in and give training specifically on how to, for instance, I manage the human rights complaints process, make sure they know how to respond to incidences of racism and discrimination step by step on how to name and how to disturb and make sure that all incidences of racism, discrimination, are dealt with, that progressive discipline is implemented. But when it's part of the strategic plan, it becomes part of our everyday, of the fabric of everything we do, so that's why it was important.
- **[ML]** So, we have programming that we send into our schools for Black History Month, Asian Heritage Month, Ramadan, Indigenous History Month, again under a catholic lens and a francophone lens. And we heard what the previous panelists spoke about, and especially for Black History Month and for Indigenous Heritage Month, we're not talking about enslavement, we're really talking about success stories and great things happening currently in the communities. **[MJBV]** And we make sure that the information we're sending is available all year. And we encourage it to become part of the curriculum for the whole entire year. Even if we underline certain months, certain days to make sure everybody gets value. We tell them and we encourage them to implement it yearlong.

Micheline Limoges:

- So, we also have monthly bulletins that we send out with the Indigenous education portfolio as well as with the equity portfolio. And evidently, we're in the business of education, so a lot of it is tailored towards teachers. But we often forget our departments within that, that support the learning. So, when we're talking about human resources, for example, finance, so how they can bring an equity lens into those spaces.

Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda :

- We use professional development days and PA days to offer specialized training for school staff. We offer trainings for accessibility, we forgot to add there, but there's antiracism training, microaggression trainings that we offer as well. I always make sure to make the links with our obligations under the human rights code, which is my specialty, but also just our obligations under the Education Act. We offer trainings for our library technicians, our preschool teachers, our elementary school teachers, on creating inclusive classrooms. And we just created a tool, an equity assessment tool also for our schools to make sure that they follow the best practices, basically, and to gauge where they are on that continuum, to see how much work they have to do. And it becomes a plan for their school year.
- So really quickly we put together an equity team that we're always looking to expanding. So not only is the superintendent with the equity and Indigenous education portfolio, it's myself as well as three pedagogical consultants that really assist the teachers one-on-one with not only workshops, but helping them put together inclusive education curriculum that really makes sure that our Black students, our Indigenous students, our racialized students are represented and feel seen in the curriculum. And we have 40 EDI equity agents in every school and sector in our school board to make sure that everything that we put together as an equity team really gets put into use on the ground where the teachers really need it.

Host (Sejal Patel):

The work that Melissa and Micheline are doing illustrates the importance of a well communicated and consistent system wide effort, including anti-racism principles embedded in the strategic plan, professional development opportunities for educators and school staff, equity champions at all levels including equity agents at every school, with pedagogical consultants and superintendents engaged in this important work of enhancing equity and human rights in education. This is the work of not only the school boards themselves, but can also be supported by advocacy from community organizations. As Executive Director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, Neethan shares about the value of restorative justice processes. In restorative justice the focus is on reconciliation and constructive accountability, and involves young people reflecting deeply on the impact of their actions on others. He also comments about the value of destreaming as a way to address systemic discrimination by having students take courses designed for all learners rather than having to select academic or applied streams, along with the value of identity-affirming pedagogy.

Neethan Shan

- I think the identity-affirming spaces, identity-affirming pedagogy, has become a context in our schools. This is partly because of the people who have done that hard work in pushing for those things. But there's also how somebody understands identity-affirming space could be problematic as well. Very tokenistic, very superficial, very limiting. So, it's something that is a process. I think the parent engagement models that are outside the school systems are a plus today. Examples, the Parents of Black children. And inside the school

system, it's still archaic, very Eurocentric. We have these traditional parent engagement models that haven't shifted and that have been a problem. But externally, we see a lot of parent organizing that's happening, and that's what's driving the change. So that is a positive, promising practice.

- Restorative justice processes have been great. We've reduced suspension and expulsion to a large extent in the last. I mean, I fought against the Safe Schools Act, I fought organized against suspension, expulsion. Things have gone down, which is a great thing.
- Destreaming is a great first step, and I think that's been advocated for a long time. But destreaming without the proper support in schools is still another form of setting up for failure as well. But destreaming was the main promising practice that we can all be happy about. Many schools now have learning, like in TDSB, we have the Learning Opportunities Index. And looking at ways in which we can differentiate between different schools within the school boards and so on. That is a plus as well to know where the needs are. So those are some of the things. Admission processes, for example, we removed barriers to getting into specialty programs and things like that as a way to diversify the pool of people who will get into those programs. So, these are some of the things that I think are shifting and partly or mainly because of activism outside the system, not necessarily inside the system. With all due respect and amazing work being done by people within the system, they're doing the best they could, but a lot of the credit needs to go for people who have been pushing it from outside.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Restorative justice processes and destreaming are promising practices that have emerged in many school boards in Ontario, and the practices continue to evolve in collaboration with students, families and staff. Jacqueline talked about how involving these perspectives can help steer foundational board policies and the development of system-wide tools such as Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's Indigenous Equity and Human Rights Roadmap.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- So, what we have done at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is we have developed what we call the Indigenous Equity and Human Rights Roadmap. Before we developed this, we went out to students, staff, and families and this was before our student survey, and the feedback they shared with us shaped this roadmap. So, this was a cumulative effort within the district. It wasn't just developed by the equity team; it was developed by the feedback of our students and families and staff. And here are the five key things that they told us. The importance of identity, identity matters. Building staff awareness and capacity matters, increasing representation in terms of both staff and curriculum resources, matter. Programming and supports for students matter, and engagement and connections matter. And when we

heard all of that, we added another element which was securing accountability, because that was our opportunity to really speak to, how do we really take this on as a district to ensure that we're accountable for shifting the culture and the practices that are moving us forward.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Accountability frameworks can play a key role in addressing reported cases of harmful discriminatory behaviour and are an example of a system-wide equity tool. Neethan and Jacqueline both touch on the importance of accountability.

Neethan Shan:

- So, I'll go into what should be done quickly. Accountability framework. All these things look good on paper, but what is happening at the school level when an incident happened, how is it being addressed? How is it being reported? How is it being filed? Unless it gets to the media, through a video or something, there's really not much attention happening to it. So, all of these things need to have accountability framework that are transparent, accounted and shared, publicly shared, otherwise we wouldn't be able to address them.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- Bias is not neutral. We all have our biases, but we need to be aware of where those biases are. And one of the things that, one of the tools we have generated to support system leaders in this and we started rolling this out last year, is our anti-hate protocol. And this provides resources which includes an administrative hate protocol, staff anti-hate protocol, modules for learning that supports this, a module on language, and guidelines to address oppression so that it becomes a tool. And it's an evolving tool, so again, when system leaders use these tools, they're engaged in expanding the evolution of this work in our district.

Neethan Shan:

- As I mentioned, racism is a very adaptive animal. It finds its way to co-op terms. EDI is freely being floated by everybody. Every system would come and tell you 100 different statistics to show they're doing well. There's a thousand stats that are not being presented. We can only address the problem if the systems can come and openly say, what are those thousand statistics and how are we addressing that if we can't have that honest conversation and we play only half side of the thing and advocate saying that they are making progress, we have to celebrate. But I think one of the challenges is how we address these things. White fragility is one of the

biggest problems. If people are uncomfortable talking about racism, it is not to change what we are talking about, it's to change how prepared they are.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- And this is why this elementary panel conversation is so important. Because some of the things we hear from our educators is, we cannot teach certain things in elementary schools because it's too advanced for students. Another quote I heard, which really sums this up well is, students are already living in and experiencing it, and so then we really need to be present to, what is it that we're saying when we are uncomfortable in the subject areas or the sensitivities that may impact the students that we serve.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Jacqueline and Neethan's points about monitoring personal biases, holding individuals accountable, and becoming comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations highlight some of the challenges that can arise when working to enhance equity for Black, Indigenous, and students of colour in elementary schools. Other challenges that the panelists discuss include a lack of resources and transparency, poor communication, inequities through school fundraising, curriculum revisions happening in a piecemeal fashion, and equity work being left to those who are equity-deserving. Melissa and Neethan shared about these challenges.

Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda:

- Very quickly, some of our challenges is lack of resources. We are getting a higher and higher demand for assistance, which is great. More and more people want the tools, want the language, want to know how to handle things. And so, we need a bigger team. We always need more resources to make sure we're there to assist everybody at every system wide. And the resistance of certain staff members, making sure that all of our initiatives are implemented in the way we want at the school level.

Neethan Shan:

- Who's getting resources? Who's not? You look at the schools who have fundraising millions of dollars and schools that are fundraising \$2,000 for essentials. We had campaigns to protect swimming pools in affluent areas, which is great, I'm all for swimming pools, but there are principals and special education cuts, and things are happening in racialized communities' area that are completely dismantling the amount of support that's available. Look at elementary schools with 600 kids with limited capacity, administrators are running around trying to manage rather than build a school culture.
- Fundraising for essentials should be banned or those who are fundraising, 1 million should keep 10,000 and rest of the money should be going to other places. They won't do it. But I think we have to find a way to make sure that

these two-tier schools are not existing in our system. In fact, if that's what's going to happen, per capita funding for students should be differentially allocated to the schools that are not able to fundraise and not able to do this.

- One of the other challenges, we think that we have a model that says parents have to be the advocates, and it's unfortunately not possible for many parents to be able to afford the time, the resources and all those things and then be treated badly when they come into schools. We have a problem because the system does not understand why the anger is there. Instead of trying to just look at it superficially, we have to know that when somebody complains to me and gets angry at me as a trustee, I don't take it personally because it's not just about me. I am part of the system and I have a responsibility to bear the brunt of what the system has done. So, the anger is cumulative. And so, we have to be able to understand that, if you don't understand that, we won't be able to do well in our schools.
- One of the other things that has happened is around translation and interpretation being seen as a charitable function in our school system. My question to the system usually is, how did a language that was spoken in one particular country in the world become international language? What took place? And why are we all learning English? Why are we all speaking in English across the globe? And so, a translation is a transformative process of removing historic disadvantage. An interpretation is a right of a historic disadvantage, historic disadvantage created by occupation colonialism. So, when parents go and ask for translation, the principals and the vice principals and others should know that it's not a charitable function that you're providing. In fact, you're addressing a historic disadvantage that has been placed on people across the world by colonialism.
- So, how do we invest into advocacy networks and navigation support? The Ministry of Education should be allocating a certain amount of money directly to go into those navigation support that are external to the school board. To be able to say each parent who's facing this will have adequate amount of time and support to help them through the process. Curriculum overhaul, if we had started one grade a year, like say we start this year and we say we do grade one curriculum, everybody across Ontario focus on grade one and do every year one grade. I passed a motion in 2016 in TDSB, and it passed unanimously and passed at the Ontario Public School Board association saying every grade should be, curriculum should be overhauled, not reviewed. And what happens now is you design curriculum and bring it for equity checklist. You need to just stop that and start from scratch and have an equity-based, fully equity-based curriculum development.

Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda :

- Sometimes our messaging, which is one of our setbacks we'll talk about, doesn't necessarily get to the community and the students the way we intend it to, even at a senior level, because a lot of information can get stuck at

administration in different schools. So, we have to have those agents on the ground to make sure that that messaging is going through.

Host (Sejal Patel):

In this last segment, panelists revisit some of the key issues. They encourage us to continue collaborating with one another, engaging in uncomfortable conversations, and committing to transformative efforts to advance equity for students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in elementary schools.

Neethan Shan:

- I want to finish off with this. One critical piece is that I usually advocate for antiracism and anti oppression initiatives because, what has happened is equity has become a service, equity has become a charity, as opposed to transformative process. Equity is happening because of historic disadvantage of centuries. And people forget that. People think, okay, these are people who need it, people who want, who need to have that extra support, and I'm providing it as a form of equity. The context of why people need it is lost. And if we don't remind ourselves why we need that every single day, we will lose the context. So anti-racist, anti-oppressive framework is the critical piece.
- The word progress is sometimes the biggest barrier for progress. The reason I say is people call themselves progressive. People identify themselves as progressive politics and so on, and they are just managing time and dragging things along. So, we have to always measure progress with the magnitude of the problem. And if we don't have a context of the magnitude of the problem, progress may look like a great thing, but in fact it is just managing inequities and dragging it along.
- So, we need to do more work to prepare people to become uncomfortable and discomfortable and be able to do this work as opposed to now figuring out ways to change things. And this is a trend that we are noticing right now, like, how do we bring everybody together? How do we make them feel comfortable? How do we bring people along? It is about time that we know that this work, if it's not done at the right time and right place and right amount, we are losing our children every day. The mental health of our children who are impacted by racism and the parents needs to be into consideration too.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- Part of this is how do we move through that cycle of change with our system leaders in particular at this point, as well as those who are serving educators in different capacities, such as our coaches, to listen to them from a space of, what is their comfort zone? And then this next phase you go into whenever change is happening is your fear zone. Or some people call that discomfort. But it's necessary to go through those phases so we can get into that learning zone, and then ultimately a growth zone, and then ultimately a transformation zone. And I'm not saying this is a linear process, but it's something to be

mindful of as we listen to our colleagues, our students, our families, such that we can understand how do we really apply equitable and inclusive tools to be really tools of transformation in our workplaces and learning culture.

- This work requires growth, it's growing with the intention and the commitment to learn from everything, including our mistakes. And that takes critical ownership to be able to do that. And embracing expectancy, eagerly anticipating change such that we can serve our students well, and staying engaged, so that we can learn as we go through the process. Learning is an ongoing process, how do we model that for our students?

Host (Sejal Patel):

Holding space for student and family perspectives to be considered and learning from them is key. Micheline shared about using school climate survey data to inform the focus of school board initiatives. Jacqueline highlighted the importance of being open to learning from students, families and communities.

Micheline Limoges:

- When we look at our school climate data survey, we see that the adults, students feel safe with adults. They are accepted. They feel they can talk to them. Our work needs to happen, students versus students. And so that's where our focus is this year with how to give students the tools.

Jacqueline Lawrence [VIRTUAL]

- This notion that somehow, we're going to be able to do this work by ourselves, as individuals, as organizations, is actually setting ourselves up for failure. We cannot do this work without students. We cannot do this work without engaging families. We cannot do this work without engaging the full diversity of our staff. We cannot do this without engaging our communities. And so, this requires us again to expand ourselves in terms of, how do we listen for who to engage, when to engage, because we do not have the answers for everything.
- Discerning the impact and nuances of lived experience and really inviting people to step into the space from a space of humility. This is a critical lesson that our Indigenous colleagues have really been very emphatic with us in terms of sharing with us. How do we step into that space of uncertainty, that space of discomfort with humility? Hard work to do, but necessary work to do. And so, this invites us to really step into spaces, coming as learners side by side with our educators, with our students, with our colleagues, and with our families.
- If you hear nothing else in this from me, it's to really remember the acronym PIE. And it's Perception, Interpretation, and Evaluation, because without us understanding our own perceptions, our own interpretations, and the way we assess and evaluate students, staff, and families, it's critical. But here's the

other critical piece, it's to understand the social construct, which is that incubator where this was generated. So, if we don't understand how the culture, and I'll close with Peter Drucker's quote, which is significant, "culture eats strategy for breakfast every time". So, we can do some great work, but if we're not addressing the culture of the learning and working spaces that we're in, we will see absolutely little change over time.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Melissa Jean-Baptiste Vajda, Micheline Limoges, Jacqueline Lawrence, and Neethan Shan, 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.