

## **PANEL C – EQUITY FOR DISABLED 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 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 disabled students. We were fortunate to have three amazing panelists whose contributions will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Dr. Maria Karmiris, who is a teacher and lecturer.
- Luke Reid, who is a human rights lawyer.
- And Ingrid Palmer, who is the founder of Focus on Ability, IDEAL Chief Officer at Realize Canada, and a Parent.

These panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question invited panelists to share any promising approaches to enhancing equity for disabled students, as well as any specific resources or practices. To begin, Ingrid shared and explained the acronym IDEAL, which provides a good starting point for this episode's discussion about disability.

#### **Ingrid Palmer**

- Relationships must come first, in the context of I.D.E.A.L., IDEAL, that's an acronym coined by the organization that I work, Realize, and it stands for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, Leading to Belonging. Ameliorating the social status of students with disabilities requires intentional, consistent, and persistent adult intervention, in ways that will not have the student facing the adversity, blamed, pitied, or merely tolerated.
- To nurture an IDEAL school-wide ecosystem, an awareness and appreciation of interdependence must be cultivated in childhood. The term interdependence simply means that absolutely everyone has areas of strengths, and areas where we need support. We all help each other, and accessibility needs are for everyone, not just people with disabilities.
- Learning cannot happen without connection. Inclusion and belonging are not niceties to have. They are necessities. The norms of ordinary friendship, peer engagement, and meaningful participation remain areas of well-being that

everyone not chronically experiencing exclusion take for granted.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

Ingrid Palmer's emphasis on learning through connection and relationships is illustrated in an anecdote shared by Maria Karmiris, about her former students who worked together to cultivate inclusion with one another. This experience demonstrates the promising practice of school leaders putting in the extra effort to create conditions where positive and constructive relationships are supported and sustained.

**Dr. Maria Karmiris**

- One example that I can invite you to think about is, when we think about disability as being integral to our human relationships, is a lesson I learned a long time ago from one of my former students, well three of my former students, because the story is about the three of them.
- I was teaching grade three and I had these three students in my class, and both were racialized brown boys from the Bangladesh community.
- Two of those boys had physical disabilities, and one was non-disabled. All three were amazing friends in my class. Actually they were in the same class, it was a big school, but somehow the principal worked it out so they were always in the same class together, because they had such a great friendship.
- My point being, that through and in their friendship, they understood that disability was integral to their human relationships. And what their friendship taught me was, how we might invite disability into our teaching and learning practices in ways that facilitate and enrich our relationships. Because they understood what I would contend many adults still don't understand, is that disability is part of the human experience. And is part of getting to know each other and be in community with each other.
- So, I leave you with that example, kind of as a counter story, to the kind of hegemonic story that continues to represent disability as a problem that requires a solution, because there are many other stories to tell about disability.
- Those that foreground the experiences and knowledges and perspectives of children and youth with disabilities, and foreground the knowledges and perspectives of their caregivers and loved ones, in ways that might facilitate opportunity for us to engage with each other in a manner that would foreground relationships as part of an understanding of what inclusion might or could be.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

The tension between exclusion and inclusion was a recurring theme in this discussion on equity for disabled students. Luke Reid also shared an anecdote from his experience as a lawyer working with a young Black student with multiple disabilities who faced an exclusion from school.

### **Luke Reid**

- This is a case I was involved in a few years ago, and it was a case where the conflict sort of escalated over time
- So, it involved a young black student with multiple disabilities. He had some behaviour problems as a result of his disabilities, and he was facing an exclusion from school. So, under Section 265(1)(m) of the Education Act, and several conditions of his re-entry, he had to go see his pediatrician and then get a new behavioral management plan as a condition for re-entry. So, you know, the opposite of inclusion. This is explicit exclusion.
- So, the day of the incident there was a communication book, and they send home a communication that says this student, quote, “he picked up a stool pretending to throw it”. So, not good, not good, and I think this is something that we, you know, needs to be dealt with in some way. And so, mum has a nasty conversation, quite frankly, with the school board that night, does not want them to exclude him.
- The next day, the school excludes him anyways, and they describe his behaviour as, quote, “holding a stool overhead and threatening to throw it at staff”, end quote. So, you can sort of see a shift there. You can see he was pretending to throw it, and now he’s threatening to throw it at staff.
- After that, there’s another meeting which is fairly vitriolic. Mum challenges the school very aggressively on their decision to exclude her son, and another letter is issued 11 days later, and they describe his behaviour as, quote, “picking up and throwing stools”.
- So, you can see an evolution here. It’s an evolution that I would argue sort of is consistent with a stereotype about young male students with disabilities, particularly those that are racialized, namely that they are more aggressive.
- But my point is not, I mean my point is that stereotypes are bad, but my point is, I don’t raise this because I think it is the stereotype here in isolation that is driving what is happening here, it’s the conflict. The school, I think in this moment, the staff are feeling defensive. They’re, I mean, this is admittedly a challenging child to educate. So, they’re a little bit tired and they feel an overwhelming urge to justify their decision. They’re tired, they’re feeling angry, and this is I think when sometimes we unconsciously reach for those sorts of stereotypes.

- You know, sometimes it slips into the way we perceive things and can affect our decision making.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

Luke's anecdote highlights the complexity of interactions between schools, staff, students, and families, which brings us back to Ingrid's earlier point about the importance of positive relationships in ensuring that all students feel included. Ingrid shares more about how we can foster understanding when working with disabled students. Maria then highlights certain contradictions that exist in the work of advancing equity for disabled students and the hierarchical nature of resource allocation.

**Ingrid Palmer**

- It is important to be cognizant of the episodic nature of some conditions, and to understand that accommodations must remain fluid and adaptable. Set the expectation right from the beginning for universal participating with equal status. Explain and demonstrate what making space for others looks like.
- Repair from harm must always happen. That means having ongoing, honest conversations. I personally love talking circles. Schedule regular belonging check-ins, and customize interventions based on the results. In this way, true friendship, bonding, empathy, and collective valuation has a chance to flourish.

**Dr. Maria Karmiris**

- The tiered model of support, which, those of you who are in the field of education, for those of you who are not familiar with it, it's very easy to explain. It's a triangle. It appears almost in all documents related to inclusion models. It's shaped like a triangle. All people get this support, some people will get this, a few people will get that. It's a tiered model of support in essence, a resource allocation model, we have funding for this that the other. And the ways in which that type of tiered model of support, which is kind of a taken for granted assumption that that's how inclusion should operate, generates the conditions where children and youth feel a sense of exclusion from school, because there's varying ability to access resources in this tiered model of support. And as an aside it should all make us wonder that apparently this model for inclusion that's shaped like a triangle reinforces notions of hierarchies. And how could it be that something that's intended for inclusion also sustains the hierarchies of exclusion? Anyway, it's just something to think about.
- Our current understanding of inclusion as being spatial inclusion. So somehow in education, we've conflated spatial inclusion with inclusion. I can share the same space with people and not feel included, right? I can be in the same room with a group of people and I'm off to the side by myself and nobody's paying any attention to me. So, this notion that our current model of

inclusion *is* inclusion, is also something that I would invite you to reconsider, by foregrounding the importance of disability within our understandings of each other and our human relationships.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

In this next segment, Luke, Ingrid, and Maria talk more in depth about the obstacles that they face in advancing equity for disabled students.

**Luke Reid**

- I can tell you that there are some unique features of high-conflict situations that really work against equity and equality for students with disabilities.
- Now I think everybody can sort of imagine what a high-conflict situation involves. I'm sure everybody maybe has been in one at one point in their lives. You know, but just for the sake of getting us all on the same board, in my view, high-conflict situations involve overly adversarial stances on the part of various parties, a preoccupation with winning an argument and blaming others. A lot of all-or-nothing thinking, power struggles, some extreme behaviours. There's a lot of things about a high-conflict situation, a lot of behaviour patterns and mindsets that can really detract from our ability to educate students with disabilities. And at this stage, I always emphasize to people, this is not a problem unique to any one party in these situations.
- And I do want to emphasize, educators sometimes get locked into this mindset as well. They are not immune to the sort of behaviour patterns and mindset that involve high-conflict situations.

**Ingrid Palmer**

- People are not nice and considerate of you just because you have a disability. We like to imagine that that is the case or that it will happen, but it does not. Vulnerability, especially when coupled with disability, engenders far more cruelty than humanitarianism. That's an uncomfortable but very real truth that evidence and experience bears out time and time again. After repeated, cumulative instances of exclusion, dismissal, and devaluation, a child with disability will most likely begin to internalize the beliefs of ableism; that they are not capable, that they are less deserving, and have little chance of succeeding, of finding success in the ways that matter the most to them.
- The discomfort of disability comes more so from people without disabilities than people with disabilities. And when the person with the disability is discomforted, it typically stems from supremacist social norms and behaviours.

**Dr. Maria Karmiris**

- The question I've posed here today is, what happens when we stop thinking about disability as a problem and start thinking about disability as integral to human relationships? And I think it's a really important question for us all to critically examine and think about. I would posit that education, as it's

currently structured at the various levels, proceeds to situate itself as understanding disability as a problem that requires a solution. And in so doing, generates the conditions where the second question I have posted on the slide there, which was asked about 120 years ago, 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois' famous *The Souls of Black Folk* "How does it feel to be a problem?". Because these two things are interconnected. And in thinking about what it means to understand disability as a problem, we might also think about how the procedures, systems and structures within the field of education isolate disability in the individual, in ways that also imagine that individual people are problems. And in so doing generates the conditions where children feel excluded from the learning environment.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

All panelists emphasize how each of us could benefit from self-reflection and critical thought about how we understand—or perhaps don't understand—disability. In this last segment, Ingrid, Luke, and Maria share their perspectives on actions to enhance equity for disabled students. They caution against the danger of low expectations, emphasize the power of student involvement, and highlight the importance of considering intersectionality.

**Ingrid Palmer**

- In my work on two nationwide research projects on disability and employment, I hear time and time again about the detriments of low expectations and poor quality education and school experiences.
- Ensuring that students with disabilities are sufficiently equipped to resist low expectations, the negative attitudes of others, and the barrage of barriers that they will inevitably face requires targeted structures to familiarize them with occupying positions of leadership and influence, so that there will develop within them an effective self-advocacy response and resistance to inequity. This will counter the development of internalized ableism, so that students with disabilities are not shackled to anyone's limitation of them, and that includes family, educators, peers, and the broader society.

**Luke Reid**

- I guess my fundamental point here, could be distilled as, I guess we need to think carefully about how these interpersonal dynamics affect the decisions that are made about students with disabilities.
- I'm going to highlight just a couple of things that I think everybody involved in these situations do not do well, and that have the potential to help. So, the first one is involving the student more in these sorts of situations and meetings. I mean, it might sound difficult to do that, but I think it's very important and I'm going to get into that in a second. The second is, and this is maybe more of a general comment, less related to this particular situation, but I don't think there's enough apologies in these sorts of situations. People don't

do that early enough and soon enough. And the third is this sort of more flows from my example, recognizing when we are vulnerable to making some of these assumptions about students. And that is largely in high-conflict situations.

- I will just say, okay, one, involving students more. You would be so surprised at how much the presence of a student in a meeting related to their education, regardless of what it is, sucks the vitriol out of the room. It is much easier to be nasty and angry without that student present, than it is with them, the object, the person we are all supposed to be helping, when they are sitting there looking at us. There's a lot of other reasons to involve the student more, but I will say this is one of the side benefits. And in the field of disability education, this is not something that is being done very well at various school boards, involving that student in decisions about their education, regardless of what they are. Now, I don't want to say that's hard and fast, like maybe there are circumstances where it's not appropriate, but I think it's an important thing to do. And then the second thing, I just want to emphasize, the number of cases that have come through my door where a parent or a student have been just really upset about what has happened in the education system that could have been resolved with an apology early enough or even at all. And I think that same thing goes both ways. I often encourage my clients when they're out of line to apologize in the interest of preserving that relationship, because the broader point is that you cannot properly educate a student without a functioning relationship between the family and the school.

### **Ingrid Palmer**

- I cannot *not* talk about intersectionality. Students with disabilities, besides ableism, may also be battling racism, heteronormativity, faithism, yes, that's a thing, and sexism. It's important to be aware of how identity is impacting social and systemic navigation. Pay attention to how oppression constructs stereotypes and distills accommodation needs into behavioural issues, we heard about that, right?
- Our girls, non-binary, and trans students, and once again those that are racialized, especially Black, face increased barriers and need to strongly be affirmed in their worth and competence.

### **Dr. Maria Karmiris**

- There might be other ways to think about disability. So, the second quotation that's on the screen behind me here is from the work of Nirmala Erevelles, who is a scholar within Field of Disability Studies. Disability studies, for those of you who don't know, is different than the study of disability. The study of disability seeks to treat people as problems, whereas disability studies foregrounds the perspectives, viewpoints of disabled people. And I utilized disabled people on purpose here. I know in education we always say 'person with disability', disabled people is that kind of an identity way of approaching and understanding disability in order to also understand that disability is not

separate from the human experience, but integral to the human experience. So, what disability studies scholars like Nirmala Erevelles invite us to think about is that perhaps it's time to think about transforming our understanding of what disability might mean in the field of equity. Because disability of course, intersects with a whole host of other social identities. And it impacts people with a range of social identities in intersectional ways. And in thinking about that, we might also think about, if disability is something that, eventually if it hasn't touched you yet, it will touch you at some point in your life.

**Host (Sejal Patel):**

Much gratitude to the panelists - Maria Karmiris, Luke Reid, and Ingrid Palmer, 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](https://VoicEd.ca), or wherever you get your favourite podcasts. I'm Sejal Patel. Thank you for joining us.