

PANEL D – EQUITY FOR 2SLGBTQIA+ 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 key messages that were shared by presenters in a panel discussion focused on equity for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. We were fortunate to have three amazing panelists whose contributions will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Ilana David, who is a Social Worker with the Gender & Sexual Diversity Team at the Toronto District School Board.
- Malissa Bryan, who is the Founder of the Rainbow Diversity Institute.
- And Jo Jefferson, who is an Education and Training Specialist with The 519.

The panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question invited input on promising approaches to enhancing equity for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, as well as any specific resources or practices. Ilana David shares about work that is ongoing in the Toronto District School Board.

Ilana David

- So, I'm a part of the TDSB's gender and sexual diversity team, which is a team of three social workers, and our role is twofold.
- We provide support for students and families and our role as mental health professionals, as well as system and school climate support. And so, the support for students and families involves support for the Triangle Program, which is our 2SLGBTQ+ alternative high school, as well as individual social referrals in schools. And recognizing that we do have school social workers attached to all of our schools across the Toronto District School Board, we pop in when there is a need for more specialized support or social workers who share identities along the 2SLGBTQ+ spectrum with students who are looking for support.
- And then our system support is around providing professional learning to school staff. And so that includes teachers, but also office assistants and

administrators, caretaking staff, lunchroom supervisors, really helping school communities understand what the needs of our 2SLGBTQ+ students and families are and how they can better support them. We often consult with schools. So, on things like how do we support a student who is going through a gender transition in our school space to ensure that experience is a positive one? Or how do we deal with ongoing homophobic incidences on our playgrounds? How do we respond to this email from a parent who says they don't want their child to be part of this workshop that's coming up on trans and queer identities?

- We do provide support for GSAs or Gender and Sexuality Alliances at our schools when required, and we try to connect with community partners and resources. And we are very fortunate in the city of Toronto to have an abundance of community resources and partners available to support students and families and to support teachers in doing this work in schools

Host (Sejal Patel):

Ilana mentions GSAs, which refers to Gender and Sexuality Alliances. These are described by the TDSB as student-initiated and student-run clubs. GSAs provide a safe, supportive environment where students of diverse genders and sexualities can meet, discuss sexual orientation and gender identity, and form community. Malissa Bryan also shared about GSAs as a promising practice and elaborated on parent groups.

Malissa Bryan

- We also have student and parent groups available. So, the TDSB GSA Network is represented here. And that was an incredible collective of secondary teachers that came together in the early days of the pandemic to create a virtual, system-wide GSA for students who were isolated in homes, often without the support of families, and most definitely lacking the support of brick and mortar schools, and the GSA Network has survived beyond those days of being at home for school. It now continues to run weekly meetings for students. It's expanded to include grades six to eight, as well as secondary, and an elementary GSA network has also come to fruition where elementary school GSA advisors are able to connect and share resources.
- We also run parent groups. So, the groups I was speaking about a moment ago that come through our team is GIG, or the Gender Independent Groups. And that was started over ten years ago by a former TDSB social worker in response to the needs of mostly younger, trans, nonbinary, two-spirit, gender diverse kids. So, recognizing that a lot of our conversations at that time were occurring in high schools around gender diversity, gender identity, gender expression. And the social worker was seeing, I have families coming to me saying, my child is trans, or my child is expressing what would be termed gender nonconformity, and they're bumping up against extreme resistance in school environment, both from other kids, from staff members, from

administrators who weren't quite sure how to support them or what to do about the bullying that came about. So, this group was started initially as a parent support group and has expanded to include a kid's element as well

- And then we have system-wide events such as our EnVision Conference, which is a collaboration between multiple departments centrally in the TDSB. And this is one of our flagship events where we gather almost 500 students from across the system into a space. There's a middle school and a secondary conference to talk about all things identity, allyship, 2SLGBTQ+, etc.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Amazing work can be accomplished through collaboration, which ideally should extend beyond schools and boards, to include community organizations such as The 519 and the Rainbow Diversity Institute. Jo Jefferson and Malissa Bryan share more about this community collaboration.

Jo Jefferson

- At The 519, our education and training department also works with other professionals who are doing work with families, with children, with youth. So, we really cross a spectrum of folks who have a big impact on lives of a whole bunch of people at different ages who are influencing children especially.
- Other things that I have found reassuring as a parent are to understand and to have people sharing explicit information about the current legal frameworks. I know that doesn't appeal to everyone, but for me it was like, oh yes, this stuff is already written into our laws. It's already encoded. It's not just a vague 'we should respect people's rights', but there are very clear cut laws and policies that already exist.
- We're also not only at the protests but also at the press conferences and at the board tables. We're in the council chambers and we're in courtrooms, and we are everywhere that we can do this work. We've done a lot of campaigns around responding to threats to equity in education, especially a few years ago when the sex-ed curriculum was being threatened in Ontario, and The 519 really pulled together this beautiful campaign that involved students in advocating for their own rights to fair education.

Malissa Bryan

- A little bit about the Rainbow Diversity Institute [RDI]. We do lots of work. I'm going to use the very short version. We do policy development. We support organizations on needs assessments and training in providing different research support and many other things, keynotes, talks, lots of things. But all of our work really surrounding anything to do with equity, diversity and inclusion and really centering the voices of LGBTQ folks. So, really thinking

about kind of curriculum integration, because I was thinking about, hey, what is one of the main things that RDI comes across to really support this work and that's going really well? And when school boards are able and classrooms are able to really integrate to us LGBTQ folks' lives, issues, realities, just all of it into the curriculum in a normalized pattern, typically we do see positive changes and outcomes in that way.

Host (Sejal Patel):

The work of the Rainbow Diversity Institute underscores the shared interests of schools and community partners, as well as how impactful it can be when these groups work together. Ilana and Malissa elaborate.

Ilana David

- So, some of the work that is happening is resources that have been created to help with curriculum integration. So, there are some great resources out there and available that we often refer to, but it's really great for teachers to have resources that were created within our school board.
- When there's something that says, this comes from my board, and this is what the lesson plan is here that I'm doing, it gives teachers a lot more confidence in delivering that material. So having resources available are great.

Malissa Bryan

- Integrate LGBTQ2S+ topics within the curriculum as much as possible. If we're talking about sports, we can talk about this community. If we're talking about politics, anything that we talk about in history, 2SLGBTQ folks have been there and they have done many great things or have had many challenges and struggles. So, including them into the mainstream curriculum is going to be really important, and utilizing an intersectional lens also supports as well.
- The erasure of folks from the LGTBQ community when we're thinking about history and how we teach history is so important. And then when we do often teach LGBTQ2S+ history, it often is erased, Black folks face erasure, Indigenous folks face erasure, people with disabilities often are not even a thought to touch on. So that's really important that we do so in a very intersectional way that's inclusive.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Panelists were also invited to share about some of the challenges that they have experienced in working to enhance equity for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in elementary schools. Jo, Malissa, and Ilana all acknowledged how difficult this work can be.

Jo Jefferson

- I try not to engage with fear-mongering, but it is feeling increasingly risky to exist as a potential target of hate, and especially for my own kids as part of a queer and trans family, to exist as targets of hate even in their own classrooms.

Malissa Bryan

- There's fear for students at times to be themselves in the classroom, to ask questions. Sometimes there's fear at home, and sometimes there's fear even between peers. At times there's fear for teachers, for authentically teaching and being inclusive of LGBTQ in their studies and curriculum. So, removing some of that fear is important and kind of being human rights based can support them.

Ilana David

- There's so much great stuff happening and yet, the day-to-day work of 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion is really challenging. I think folks are probably aware of the political rhetoric of this time across Canada, where policies are actually changing. And then here in Ontario, where it's just our political leaders making really harmful comments about the rights of our trans, non binary, gender diverse students in particular. And this kind of movement of not necessarily supporting human rights in the way that we'd like to see this movement of people pushing back against sexual orientation and gender identity education in the school system, it's creating immense amounts of fear. And so, when I'm talking to school staff, the majority of staff, and this is not everyone, but the majority of staff, are saying, I want to do this work and I want to do it well, and I'm terrified. I'm terrified that I'm going to get it wrong. I'm terrified that I'm going to have parents beating down my door saying, why are you teaching my children this? And those fears are warranted because that's what they're seeing and that's what they're hearing in their spaces.

Jo Jefferson

- It's really painful to watch how the very real concerns and fears of parents are being manipulated and misinformation is being used to advance a broader fascist agenda. And it's really painful to think of teachers facing those concrete day-to-day consequences of government actions and trying to navigate these policy changes that they know are harmful.
- One of my favourite pieces here is around this whole issue of parental rights that has been part of the rhetoric. And I like this articulation that it's developed from similar language that was used to talk about women in the past, that's been used to talk about black people in slavery, you know this whole idea of ownership of humans that is just so counter to everything that we're trying to work towards. And I think putting it in that context really frames it in a way that makes it abhorrent, obviously abhorrent.

Malissa Bryan

- Parental disapproval can be a huge challenge for teachers who are trying to support holistically the whole family and not just the student, or may have fear of retaliation, not only against themselves but also against the student when they do go home. So that can be really difficult. The students' rights versus parents' rights, some of those rights are imagined. Some of them are ingrained, right and really looking, leaning back on human rights there can be very challenging when there's different messaging coming from different administrations, that can be challenging as well. Teachers and staff, like just having enough competency about the 2SLGBTQIA community and the needs, to be able to teach their students, especially if they have not had the opportunity to learn that within their own college spaces. That can be very difficult and not feeling that they have the right resources and just competing needs. Feeling that there's competing needs from various groups and giving all the equity-seeking groups attention can often come up as a continuous theme that I hear. And I try to remind folks that this work is intersectional.

Ilana David

- Queer and trans staff are also experiencing that homophobia and transphobia directly. And so, when you think about pushback around teaching a lesson, and then add on that layer of pushback about teaching a lesson that has to do with a community that you represent, and so that challenge is real, and students are the ones who are impacted by that. There are also a lot of mixed messages out there. So when we have a Minister of Education saying one thing about this topic and where people should or shouldn't have rights around knowledge, around their children, and yet we have human rights policies that say, we need to be having these conversations and doing this work, and we have a human rights code that says we need to be honouring the human rights of all of our students around gender identity, gender expression. It's confusing. And so there are multiple times when I'm engaging conversations in schools where I am repeating statements from our policy guidelines around supporting trans and nonbinary students, or I am quoting the Education Act, or I am quoting our human rights policy, saying it says right here that we need to do this work. Not only that we can, but we need to do this work, and it's imperative to the safety of all of our students. And yet, teachers aren't aware of that language.
- And there's often the conflation between human rights education - which includes gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation - and sexual health education. So, we know that, for example, students do have the right to opt out of particular elements of our growth and development curriculum and health class, but that does not give them the right to opt out of human rights education. So, when we talk about gender identity, sexual orientation, this can happen across grades, across classes, in any context, and there is no opt out of that. But there's a lot of confusion, and that opting out is often enabled at the school level.

- There's also the really problematic conflation of religious rights versus 2SLGBTQIA rights, as if they are in contrast to each other. There is an assumption, then, that there are no intersections between faith-based groups and queer- and trans-groups.
- So we need to be recognizing the intersections of identities and how we're taking that up in school spaces.
- We need more professional learning and support for teachers to do this work effectively. So that's mandatory learning and ongoing support for school staff. We need to be not only engaging our 2SLGBTQIA stakeholders, students, families, community members, but we need to be listening. We need to be responding to the asks that they are bringing to the table. And we need to ensure also that those stakeholders are representing not just trans and queer identities but are representing intersections of identities. So, we need to have Muslim queer folks on our Community Advisory Committee. We need to have Black trans folks on our student voice groups. We need to be representing all parts of those communities.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Intersectionality was a recurring theme during the symposium, and Ilana underscores why considering how multiple identities intersect and interact throughout one's life is important. In this last segment, panelists summarize the key actions that they think need to be taken by education stakeholders in enhancing equity. Malissa begins by talking about the role of representation.

Malissa Bryan

- Visible representation is important. So, we know representation really helps folks to be able to see themselves, to understand other lived realities and identities and also dispel stereotypes and myths that may be preventing belonging and inclusion from fully manifesting itself. Representation in books is really important for really small kids. I love teachers that share books that are maybe about two moms or two dads or non-binary folks without it being labeled as such. They're just part of the characters. Kids tend to be able to identify those things as yeah, that's no problem, they have two parents that are the same gender and not really think much about it as being an issue. Sometimes that's really good, especially for elementary school students. Visible representation also comes in the form of when I think about staff being visibly able to be themselves in front of students and in front of other staff members, that makes a big difference.
- I think about family studies and social sciences to be inclusive of different family representations, not just in the LGBTQ community, but also grandparents, and grandparents also being from the LGBTQ community as well, and foster parents and other types of parents, when we're thinking about

families and seeing the different ways that families come together can be really important.

Host (Sejal Patel):

This notion of coming together connects with a promising practice referred to as 'affinity groups', which Jo Jefferson from The 519 describes in more detail.

Jo Jefferson

- The other thing I want to point out is that we have started working with a model that seems very effective. It's very simple, but it's the affinity group. So, we try to build those opportunities into our training sessions so that 2SLGTBQ staff can come together, and also parents and caregivers can come together in a separate space and be able to support each other. And it's apparently a pretty rare opportunity, and all I need to do is hold the space and they share with each other and really support each other and build each other up. And that seems like an effective way to provide a little extra support, extra opportunity for people to really share with each other in a meaningful way.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Again, the power of community and positive relationships resurfaces. On that note, Malissa emphasizes how impactful student-led Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are, and reminds us of the importance of providing teacher administrative support for them.

Malissa Bryan

- GSAs. I always have to touch on the GSAs. They're so important, especially when they're student-led. They're often safe spaces for LGBTQ students to, often even students that are questioning, many students may go there as allies, some studies have shown. And although they are also allies, they may also be a part of the community themselves, and it's a way for them to integrate themselves and to have support within that space. The thing is that for them to be really successful, you really do need that teacher administrative support, although it is student-led, some type of co-collaboration and resources, money, some type of budget, to be able to support learning, to support healing spaces, and just opportunity in those spaces within the GSAs.
- Offer admin support to GSAs. Sometimes they're very informal. They're not actually called that. And if you do see an opportunity to offer administrative support, it's really important to do so and advocate on the other side that the student doesn't have access to. Utilizing restorative methods during conflict is very important. Sometimes when we see incidences of homophobia and transphobia, punitive sometimes is very necessary, but if there's an opportunity to have a restorative process and to provide a learning opportunity

for those students involved and beyond, we find that that can be really successful in creating change that's sustained over time.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Sustainable change is something that we are striving to achieve in the pursuit of educational equity. Ilana talks about the importance of going deeper than surface-level, and Malissa and Jo also discuss changes that could be implemented at the institutional level.

Ilana David

- We have a lot of rainbows in our schools, we have posters, we have safer space signs in our classrooms, but the work of making schools actually feel safer for our students and families comes from the staff in the buildings. And so, while having a poster on the wall is great, we need to actually do the work behind it.

Malissa Bryan

- On the institutional level, collecting like data. Just collect the data, understand what the current state is, even when we're thinking about safe spaces, collect that data. Make sure that we're very explicit about the 2SLGBTQIA community, and collect race-based data and other data alongside to find out who we're talking about. Conduct a Comprehensive Needs Assessment specific to students and to teachers to make sure that, sometimes in different areas, there's different concerns. RDI does work in rural areas, and we do work in major cities, and those concerns are very different. So, it's really important to understand the geography, the climate, and the community that you're supporting in the school that it's in. Collaborate with LGBTQ communities that are outside of the school to understand the needs of that wider communities of families, so that we're giving wraparound support and equity and equity services to students that will also support their families.
- Institutional outdated policies, outdated software, even with pronouns and having to put students' pronouns into the software. Sometimes the software is not there, the will is there, but the software is not updated. And then having to go through the whole process to get the budget and whatnot approval, that can take some time as well as migrating it over. So, some things are just technical with some schools that need extra support there.

Jo Jefferson

- We want to be able to talk in very concrete real ways about the legal frameworks and to be able to counter some of the misinformation and the rhetoric.

Malissa Bryan

- Create clear policies that name 2SLGTBQ+ students. And never forget the staff, we need to always support our staff.
- Seeking out training opportunities, some of that there's resources that are free that folks can find. If you seek those out, there's others that are paid. But doing what you can with what you have is really important. The only wrong thing to do is nothing. That's the wrong thing, right? As long as you're doing something, you're on the right track and you keep on moving forward.

Host (Sejal Patel):

As we wrap up this episode, Malissa reminds us to remain focused on action to enhance equity.

Much gratitude to the panelists - Ilana David, Malissa Bryan, and Jo Jefferson, 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.