

PANEL E – EQUITY FOR INDIGENOUS 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 towards 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 Indigenous students. We were fortunate to have three amazing panelists whose perspectives will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Jodie Williams who is the Academic Coordinator of Indigenous Education at the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board.
- Tesa Fiddler who is the Coordinator of Indigenous Education at Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board.
- And Nicole Ineese-Nash who is the Founder and Executive Director of Finding Our Power Together, as well as an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University.

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 Indigenous students, as well as any specific resources or practices. Jodie Williams begins by sharing some progress from the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, including an Indigenous Education Policy, an Indigenous Education Advisory Council, and language programs.

Jodie Williams

- So, speaking from Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, which is in the GTA here, one of the things we did in our board, we were the first school board to establish an Indigenous Education Policy. And through that policy work, it changed what all boards have, which is an Indigenous Education Advisory Council. We took it out of an advisory role, and it became a governing decision-making body over all things for Indigenous education.
- We have a policy in our board, so we have a very stringent vetting process for all of our resources, our guest speakers, who's coming in and saying what to make sure, so that our system knows everything that we've put out for you is

safe, it's accurate, it's appropriate, and it's done with integrity. So, use our material and you really can't go wrong.

- We started a language nest program that is connected to three other school boards as well. And one of the positives, if I dare say that, that comes out of COVID was that everybody was forced online, which actually helped us with our language programs, because it's an online night school program. And so, we have students from all over the province that now are able to access Anishinaabemowin through that night school online format.
- So, it's actually a whole team of people that facilitate our language programs, both the language nest, which is for families on the weekends, and then our night school programs.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Panelists shared about the importance of ensuring that the work is being steered and informed by Indigenous peoples. Tesa Fiddler and Nicole Ineese-Nash elaborate on what this means for educators, allies, and students.

Tesa Fiddler

- So looking at promising approaches in the work that we are doing, I really empathize with the staff that I work with and the schools that I work with, that we have culturally-safe pedagogy. That, like Jodie said, we do not teach culture if you're not part of that culture, but that you engage with those cultural keepers, those knowledge keepers, and those community partners, because there is so much risk involved. That we have healing-informed or trauma-informed, I prefer the term healing-informed practice, that we recognize the legacy of colonial violence that our students continue, and their families continue to live with.
- We need to embrace meaningful allyship. What does authentic allyship look like? We're not going into saviour mode. And we have to truly value Indigenous language and knowledge systems in our schools.

Nicole Ineese-Nash

- We hear a lot about young people talking about culturally-responsive, culturally-safe curriculum. This means that Indigenous people can show up to the classroom as their full selves. They do not need to leave their culture at the door. And that's not to say that educators who are non-Indigenous are teaching culture, that's already been highlighted here, but that there is space in the environment for them to be culturally learning as well. This might even look like allowing students to take time off. TMU just recently introduced a cultural leave policy for staff here. That kind of practice is not common in educational systems but could be, to allow for young people to go to fasting ceremonies, or to go to hunting or feasting ceremonies that are seasonally

and culturally relevant.

- We also see that Indigenous young people are really seeking their language, and so having programs or having mechanisms for language revitalization is really important to them. Land-based ceremonial programs are also a way that we see that our young people really can thrive. Sometimes in the dominant school system, our young people really struggle. And so having land-based opportunities, having opportunities for them to learn that are more hands-on, that incorporate ceremony, that incorporate land-based and survival skills, are really mechanisms through which young people can learn.

Host (Sejal Patel):

The promising practices of following the lead of Indigenous peoples, and creating culturally-responsive, culturally-safe curriculum are influenced by leadership and who is making the decisions. Jodie and Tesa share about this.

Jodie Williams

- Ultimately, when I talk about the challenges and the barriers, it's going to be the same as what you see up here is, ultimately, at the end of the day, who's making the decisions? And it's always other people making decisions about other people.
- So, we just need people to get out of the way, basically. So, in talking with our superintendents, our former superintendent who worked in our department, I kept saying to him, I'm like, your job is to clear the path. That's what your job is to do, so that we can then do the work that's necessary to do.
- And so, again, where those big challenges come up is ultimately who's making the decision. So, when we look across the province, and I did work at the Ontario College of Teachers for a year as a program officer, and I was quite surprised, not surprised, that when it comes to accrediting faculties of education or AQ courses, who's making the decisions on whether those courses are appropriate? Correct? The right people are teaching them? The right people are writing those courses or teaching in those programs? And so again, it's non-Indigenous people making decisions about and for Indigenous people.
- People like myself and Tesa and others who act as board leads, we're constantly putting out the fires, because teachers are coming out of this system completely ill prepared, unequipped, either knowing nothing or in many times being taught things that would be considered Pan-Indianism or just, there's a huge problem with appropriation and a fantasization of Indigenous peoples, which falls into the realm of the romance and almost like a fetish when it comes to representation. So, all of these things are coming down the line and then our jobs, a lot of it we can't get to because we're constantly dealing with the impacts on the ground.

- So, you have a ministry where efforts are being made to overhaul curriculum, and then you have a minister who then pulls it back and takes out antiracism language, scrubs it out, takes out Indigenous content that was just put into the science curriculum for elementary. And then when asked why did you remove it, says, 'we want kids learning real science and real math so they can get real jobs.'

Tesa Fiddler

- There is hesitation and fear, defensiveness. There's all of those discomfort, feelings of discomfort. There are also system barriers. Jodie had alluded to government, government policy and government minimizing and erasure. But we also have system barriers, like unions, that are pushing back. And we think about exclusionary practices of children. In our breakout session yesterday afternoon, we talked about how students who are excluded from school for behaviours are often Black or Indigenous. And a lot of the violent incident reports that are piling up on administrators' desks are often Black or Indigenous children with some sort of complex student profile. So that is an equity issue.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Government leadership emerged as a key factor in advancing equity for Indigenous students. Systemic barriers of policy and infrastructure can also reduce or prevent access to supports for Indigenous young people. Nicole shares more about these challenges.

Nicole Ineese-Nash

- We also see that because of the diversity, we have divergences in the access to educational support. So as was shared, many Indigenous youth encounter challenges in mainstream education systems. This is then compounded when Indigenous young people are also facing mental health challenges, disability requiring specialized supports. This means that many Indigenous young people are being asked to leave their communities in order to access what should be considered the standard access. They're being asked to leave their communities in order to get specialized support, like tutoring, disability services, and other types of support services.
- There are many socioeconomic factors that are impacting our youth. Our young people talk quite a bit about systemic poverty, intergenerational trauma, not having access to basic infrastructure in their communities, such as clean water, and obviously that's going to impact their ability to succeed in an educational context. All of these taken together is having a significant impact on the mental health and well being of our Indigenous young people. At Finding Our Power Together that is our main goal, is to support our young people in accessing the holistic wellbeing that they are seeking. But we

actually need to consider what damage is being done to mental health within the education systems, and how those systems can be structured to actually promote wellbeing.

- So, we know that our Indigenous communities continue to face resource disparities. It is systematic, it is ongoing, and it is persistent. We have less funding for Indigenous education than any other system, and so we need to work towards remedying that situation. We need to close these educational funding gaps that are being put into place due to lack of resources, due to lack of funding, in order for our young people to at least meet the same standards that are being offered elsewhere in the country.
- We need to prepare our teachers to be able to teach Indigenous students effectively. We've been talking about this. It's not that you need to know how to teach about culture, but you need to understand that this is a colonial context. This isn't Indigenous context, and if you don't understand that, you should not be in a position of leadership or teaching. We need to develop curriculum that can account for this, that can actually look through what it means to be in a settler colonial context, what it means to challenge these dominant discourses of white supremacy and colonialism, and that means that we need to change the way that we prepare teachers, and we need to change our systems altogether.

Host (Sejal Patel):

To inform future planning, panelists were invited to share key actions for education stakeholders in enhancing equity. A focal discussion was centered around the recognition of how the systems that we inhabit are inherently colonial and Eurocentric. Jodie, Nicole, and Tesa share more on this.

Jodie Williams

- When we do our teacher training and things, we're always trying to tell people like, you have to come at the stance of, our system is based on white supremacy ideology, and it is a harmful space for kids. That's where we have to start at. We can't start at it's a great place, we're such a wonderful system in the world, and then there's these other things on the side here, these other problems, that we have to deal with.
- And, Indigenous people don't need saving. So, a lot of times, sometimes we talk about justice and taking action, but often there's a gaze on, 'there must be something wrong with you that I need to help you' when the issue really shouldn't be, the gaze should be over here with, what the hell's wrong with the government? Why do you still have an Indian Act? That's where it should be going towards.
- We need to have a system that understands colonialism, whiteness and white supremacy and not be afraid to talk about it, because kids' lives are at stake.

It's life and death for children, and that is a big one that a lot of people don't understand when we're having conversations at higher up tables, this is life and death. Like, life and death.

Nicole Ineese-Nash

- We also need to remove policy barriers. So, we know that policy continues to impact the way that Indigenous people receive education. And I believe that we really need to move towards decolonizing these systems. And this means that, it's not necessarily to restructure or simply to just move things to the side or create new policies. We actually need to remove the damaging policies that are perpetuating the systemic oppression of Indigenous students. We need to remove the systems altogether.
- I think because of our work in terms of suicide prevention and mental health, we really need to take seriously the impact that these systems are having on our young people. Our young people are going into mainstream education systems where they're being asked to change in order to meet the objectives of that system. This is impossible for us to do. And so, these systems, like we were highlighting, who were they created for? They were not created for us. They were created to assimilate us. And our young people are facing the brunt of that. So, we need to figure out how to create systems that are going to holistically support our young people from all diverse backgrounds and ensure that the mental health and well being of our students is not sacrificed in order to meet academic standards.
- Many of our young people do not survive, and so we need to create systems that not only allow them to survive, but hopefully to thrive.

Tesa Fiddler

- We do have to think about the white supremacy ideology, absolutely. We think about who created the systems, and who was it created for? What was the intent of our education system? Because it really is another ongoing form of colonization. The responsibility that we all have as educators is to work at, I'm not sure if it's even deconstructing at this point, but it's about minimizing the harm that is happening, the ongoing harm. When I think about reconciliation, we have to be so careful that it's not becoming rhetorical. It's not a fluff word, and I'm hearing it because it feels good, right? But where is the action that goes along with it? It's about practicing that authentic allyship.
- So, the responsibility of non-Indigenous people is to call out, I think, for Indigenous education, as an ally, to call out racism or to call it in, right? For white people to call in each other and say, hey, you're being racist, or that's really ignorant of you, and that it takes a lot of courage. That's really really difficult.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Responsibilities of non-Indigenous peoples extend beyond naming discrimination or systemic barriers. It is also crucial to take the time and initiative to self-educate and self-reflect. Jodie and Tesa elaborate on what this might look like.

Jodie Williams

- Okay, so this is advice that we share that we share with our teachers in our school board. Take the time to do the learning, right? So, don't come to us asking 50,000 questions about everything. Take the time to do the learning. There are so many good resources out there, videos, books, I mean, it's endless.
- Follow the lead, ask questions. We're constantly telling people, don't go off on your own, and do not use sites like Teachers Pay Teachers. I can't tell you how many times we've seen really gross stuff happening in a classroom. So, we tell people, do not be Googling culture. And it's not your job to teach culture. It's not your culture, don't teach it. That's why we have a program where we will provide guest speakers and people to speak for themselves on that.
- And again, reflect on your practice. Are you holding up white supremacy ideology? Are you teaching colonial myths and untruths and erasure? And so, who are you uplifting? Do you have posters of Sir John A. Macdonald in your schools? Or other figures who have been only a one sided, you know, we celebrate some people's accomplishments, but we just kind of forget all of the genocide and the murder that they've done? So, we need to be uncovering and then we need to be replacing that with all of the amazing beauty, joy, and brilliance of Indigenous peoples.

Tesa Fiddler

- Cultural safety. We're beyond cultural awareness, cultural competency, cultural sensitivity, we're beyond that. Educate yourself and recognize where you fit into this spectrum of culturally safe practice. And where is your humility at? Because that's the ultimate goal, is being humble and recognizing where you fit into this spectrum of practice.

Jodie Williams

- You're gonna make mistakes. So, we tell this to educators, because I heard this brought up before, is 'I'm afraid to say or do the wrong thing, so I'm not going to do anything at all'. That's the biggest mistake, first of all, that you could, is doing nothing. You're going to make mistakes.
- Be humble. It's okay to say you don't know. And in fact, it's good pedagogical practice because this is where you're inviting students to take risks in their

own learning so that you can go on a co-learning journey with your students together.

Host (Sejal Patel):

To wrap up this segment, Nicole reminds us of the diversity of Indigenous peoples and the importance of community connections.

Nicole Ineese-Nash

- Our Indigenous young people are not a homogeneous group. We are so diverse. We have a diversity of experiences, cultures, languages, different access to different support systems. And so, it's really important that we understand that when we're having this conversation about enhancing equity, that we need to understand that this is a diverse population. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and therefore, we need to think through what it might look like to create some safety, to create environments where not only Indigenous peoples can thrive, but all peoples. What we see is that Indigenous peoples are facing the brunt of colonization, but that, in fact, decolonizing those systems benefits everyone.
- We also see community engagement as highly important. So having things like advisories, but also monopolizing on the community in which you are teaching, the community in which your systems are structured around, involving that community, and that goes for Indigenous communities, but it should be a standard practice. Our systems should be centered around the community in which we're serving. And so, the community should have direct input, decision making practice, and actually benefit from the systems that they are participating in.
- We also see that young people are really seeking mentorship opportunities, and this might be with other young people, Elders, community members, those who have the lived experience, cultural relevance, to be able to promote learning for young people. I also think this is a really easy thing to put into place, particularly in systems where there isn't a lot of Indigenous educators, finding Indigenous mentors to enter into that system can be really effective

Host (Sejal Patel):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Jodie Williams, Tesa Fiddler, and Nicole Ineese-Nash, 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.

