PANEL F – EQUITY FOR STUDENTS LIVING IN LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS NEIGHBOURHOODS
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 living in low sociodemographic neighbourhoods. We were fortunate to have three amazing panelists whose perspectives will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Yvonne Kelly who is the Community and Partnership Developer at York Region District School Board.
- Maria Yau who is the Founder of EquiFair Research Consulting.
- And Michael Kerr who is the Coordinator at Colour of Poverty.

The panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question asked them to share any promising approaches to enhancing equity for students living in low sociodemographic neighbourhoods, as well as any specific resources or practices. First, Michael Kerr shares about Colour of Poverty, and the poverty related research that they have carried out.

Michael Kerr

- For those that might not be familiar with Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, basically a bit of a brief mandate statement of what we try and do in moving racial justice agenda forward across the province, and when and where possible and appropriate, bringing together the very unique and different experiences of racialization. That experienced by Indigenous peoples, and that experienced by peoples of colour. And as we do that, we try to identify opportunities and create opportunities for developing the depth of shared understanding and knowledge of each of that different set of lived experiences where there are similarities and parallels and where there's overlap and where there's not. And both are critical to understanding how we can work together in best solidarity to bring about needed change.

- One of the first things we did was come up with a set of fact sheets to try to highlight the nature and highlight the drivers, more importantly, of the experiences of marginalization and exclusion and higher rates of poverty among peoples of colour and Indigenous peoples in Ontario

- Some of the things that certainly jumped out when we first did the original analysis was the fact that the highest rate of poverty among peoples of colour in the province were among West Asian or Arab Ontarians, and the third highest were Korean Ontarians. Just to note. And then you compare that against white folks, people of European or Caucasian background, the last line at the bottom of 11.5%. And you contrast that all the way up to the two, three, four times. And in fact, once you start to unpack some of these aggregated categories, like South Asian or West Asian or Black, you'll see rates of poverty that are six, seven times the rate of white folks.

- This is not just a Toronto phenomena, this is not just a large urban center, GTA phenomena, but this happens right across the province.

- Of course, we know all too well that first and foremost, students who are Black or students who are Indigenous and in different places across the province, students that are of West Asian or Arab background, are profiled in different ways. And again, a very useful resource for helping to go about doing that, the OHRC handbook called 'Count Me In'.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Having reliable and accessible data enables systems to identify and make plans to address gaps. Using neighbourhood level data to identify priority neighbourhoods with lower sociodemographic characteristics can help school boards to use equity-based principles in resource allocation. For example, Yvonne Kelly shares about twenty 'Performance Plus' schools in the York Region District School Board, and Maria Yau shares information about a program called 'Beyond 3:30' that supports lower socio-demographic Toronto schools.

Yvonne Kelly

- We have 20 schools that receive additional support staffing because they are located in priority neighbourhoods and have a higher level of low-income families. We have a Community and Partnership Developer team, which is made up of myself and eleven other staff members, some of whom are with us today, who support families in identity specific and culturally responsive ways, supporting them with community supports, and making sure that they are connected to the right resources, and also advocating within our own system for those families. We also have done a lot of system-wide professional development on poverty, classism, and intersections of poverty.

- We also have a partnership for the last five years with Renewed Computer Technology, which allows us to make lower cost technology available to

families twice a year. And then more recently, we've started a partnership with The Food Bank of York Region, allowing schools to host smaller food pantries on site to increase access to food for families and students.

Maria Yau

- The program, I'm always proud to talk, is called 'Beyond 3:30'. I think you would know the name, why it is called 'Beyond 3:30'. It's very strategic because of its lack of funding. So strategic in terms, first of all, on school premises right after school. That's why it's called 'Beyond 3:30'. Just go down and in this designated like gym or whatever, no transportation, additional transportation. Safety is not a big issue now because it's right in school planners. No extra venue needed.

- The goal is to level the playing field for inner city children by giving them a safe place after school. Safe place. And then providing them meaningful activities for their holistic development. So, one of the uniqueness of the program, I would say, is because it's multifaceted, it's not a homework club, it's not a basketball club or just a book club, but it's a multifaceted program with multiple components.

- And then the interesting part is the nutrition part. So, they have called junior chef programs, and this is the fun part. They love it because they're not only learning about nutrition, they're learning about food preparation. So, they really enjoy it. And we have college volunteers who come to do the teaching of food preparation. But this is also important time for the snacks. This is a time even for the dinner, to be honest with you, when we interview them.

- And then the speciality programs, they take the opportunity to help the kids to learn more about the creative expressive skills, dance, drama, but more important life skills. For example, a couple of examples like they learned about money management. So, we interviewed some of the students, said, oh, you know what, I went home and teach my parents about writing a check, about saving accounts.

- Obviously, all those components, homework club, nutrition, sport, you can imagine, we studied them for years using multiple indicators, so you can look up the reports. So obviously it helps with that area. But we also realized there's spin-off benefits in terms of peer relationship, there's social development and emotional well being. And then also we realized that they become more attentive in class.

- They are more engaging and also helping with the family dynamics. Long-term impacts are, quickly I'll say, we interview, they become alumni, graduated. Some of them volunteer back in the program. And we can see that it helps with their transition to high school, psychologically and academically. And they talk a lot about even post-secondary aspirations. Lifelong impact, we interview them, I talk about the ripple effects. And in short, I would say that it

is a cost-effective investment because of the far reaching and multiple impact to improve the trajectory of these students over time.

Host (Sejal Patel):

These innovative approaches to enhancing equity for students in low socio-demographic neighbourhoods can have lasting impacts on the opportunities for many young people. However, there are many challenges. Yvonne describes how fundraising disparities, limited access to technology, underfunding public education and deficit based thinking about poverty are problematic.

Yvonne Kelly

- The cost of attending schools for families is a real thing in a public education system. Everything from fees, the need for technology, the cost of transportation, which is more at the secondary level, and the prevalence of for-profit organizations within our school system.

- There are huge disparities that fundraising causes between lower and higher income schools. So, schools where they can raise $1,000 or $2,000 in one neighbourhood and another school can raise $100,000 in a nearby neighbourhood. So that growing gap, and by not addressing it, I go back to what was said earlier today, who does that benefit? So, parents and students in different neighbourhoods get actually very different experiences of their education system**.**

- It's also essential that we advocate for the public education to address the digital divide at the provincial, federal, and local levels and also with industry. It's just mind boggling to me that we can expect that students have access to technology, that they will bring their own technology to school when they're unable to afford it.

- Here's the big P word. Privatization. We're in that process right now. We have been for numbers of years. So, in the mid 90s, when we moved to undercutting, underfunding public education, there were substantial challenges. Reduced funding, which had a disproportionate impact on marginalized populations. It caused more reliance on school fees. So, these things were not the primary focus 20, 30 years ago, and also an increased emphasis on fundraising in schools.

- We have a continued hold in our system, our continued hold on the culture of poverty mindset, which really places the blame on individual students and families for being in poverty. It has widespread negative generalizations about the deficits of families that live in poverty and offers no systemic analysis. As Paul Gorski would say, what we believe about people in poverty will determine what we're willing to do to advocate for economic justice. So, we must begin by reviewing and looking at our views about poverty.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Maria expands on the importance of close collaboration with school administrative staff when running programs out of the school. Maria, Yvonne and Michael all comment on the necessity of sustainable funding for programs supporting low sociodemographic schools.

Maria Yau

- Close collaboration with school administrative staff to me is a key, because those sites seem to be more successful than sites that have no relationship with their school staff. So, some schools will treat it, oh, this is just after school program, okay, they give them the space and let them do it. But sites with school principals, working closely with the program staff, with the teachers, communicating with the instructors about the student needs, over time, those schools are more successful in the programs. Of course, funding. We kept on talking about funding. We need sustainable funding.

Yvonne Kelly

- We need to find an equitable way to redistribute funds to be able to address the needs in some of our schools. So, there is a proposed equity model of sharing and redistributing fundraising dollars that several boards have looked at.

Michael Kerr

- The other two policy objectives that I just want to highlight is the need for what we see as a twin grant mechanism from the ministry. One is an enhancing equity education grant where I guess in ministry jargon, having that sweatered money that is wholly dedicated to, I guess, all of the things that we've been talking about yesterday and today. And the other is an Indigenous education grant, so serving the same kind of a purpose, dedicated, protected, sweatered money. And the last one is the need for a provincial, if not a national food security program, fully funded, fully implemented and comprehensive so that food security, whether it be lunch programs and other kinds of supports in schools, can be well provided for to address that aspect of need across the socioeconomic strata.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Panelists outline key actions that can be taken by education stakeholders to enhance equity for students from low sociodemographic neighbourhoods. Yvonne shares about the importance of educators and allies speaking up and disrupting systemic barriers that have been in place for so long.

Yvonne Kelly

- You don't have to know that you have a student in your classroom that's struggling, especially today. You just know that they're there. You don't have to out them, but you know that they're there. And so, it takes a lot of courage, as the other guests have said, to speak up and interrupt what's happening and challenge policy and to also challenge damaging stereotypes.

- And moving forwards, we do know that schools are moving towards taking more inclusive approaches, doing no cost trips and subsidizing those that are in need. However, the problem being with that is that the schools that may have higher needs don't have the capacity or the resources to support those families. So, a board systems approach is really what we need.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Part of this board level systems approach involves creating and prioritizing opportunities for people living in low sociodemographic neighbourhoods to share their perspectives and inform the programming and supports that are being developed for them, which Yvonne explains. Michael shares that it is also important to collect disaggregated data as a barometer of progress towards equity for historically marginalized individuals.

Yvonne Kelly

- We need to recognize that people in poverty are not at the table. They're not even in the conversation most of the time in the education sector. Policies such as Community Use of Schools are things that we can look at as ways of enhancing the ability of our schools to meet the needs of our students. We need to use our demographic data more thoroughly to collect it and collate it, to demonstrate the impact of low SES on students and how that intersects with other identities and understand that the outcomes for students in poverty, as I mentioned already, also intersects with other social identities.

Michael Kerr

- And just to underscore again and again a number of presentations already yesterday and today have highlighted the fact that the absolute necessity for disaggregated data. And so I wanted to highlight that in some of the information that I shared, the hows and the whys of why we need that data in terms of bringing about needed change, whether it be to construct and bring forward student parent surveys on a regular basis, whether we attach sociodemographic data questions to the standard intake forms at registration for all new students, new learners in the system. That intake form should in fact include questions of socioeconomic or sociodemographic profile so that boards and individual schools can do ongoing analysis of how those learners are doing and correlate those demographics with learning outcomes. And also experiences of discipline systems, in terms of the expulsions, the exclusions, the transfers, all of the various ways in which discipline is applied across the

system and looking at the relevant differentials.

Yvonne Kelly

- Poverty is intersectional. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. In fact, it combines and intersects with so many other identities to create layered forms of oppression that our students experience in our classrooms, in our communities. So, the experience of poverty isn't just the experience of living on a low-income, it's the experience that students face in their schools. You can see a lot of what we've talked about here is lack of participation because of experiencing low-income, how they're identified, where they're placed, disproportionate numbers of students in our system, and the reasons why so many don't complete high school. They also face layered forms of discrimination. Classism is the form of discrimination based on one's socioeconomic status, but also it attaches that stigma and combines with a lot of other forms of discrimination to create a layered approach and lots of threats to their well being and the potential that they have.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Yvonne Kelly, Maria Yau, and Michael Kerr, for sharing with us.

Thanks also to Stephen Hurley, founder and chief catalyst at VoicEd Radio for your support of podcast development.

For more information 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.