

PANEL G – FAITH-BASED EQUITY

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 faith-based equity. We were fortunate to have three amazing panelists whose perspectives will be featured in this episode. They include:

- Joanne Okimawinnew Dallaire, who is an Elder [Ke Shay Hayo] and Senior Advisor on Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation at Toronto Metropolitan University.
- Aasiyah Khan, who is the Director of Education Programs at the National Council of Canadian Muslims.
- And Leora Schaefer, who is the Executive Director at Facing History & Ourselves, Canada.

These panelists were provided with three guiding questions to frame their presentations. The first question asked them to share any promising approaches to enhancing faith-based equity, as well as any specific resources or practices to combat discrimination and exclusionary practices faced by Indigenous, Muslim, and Jewish peoples. Elder Joanne Dallaire begins by sharing about progress in Indigenous representation on Toronto Metropolitan University campus, and also shares about Kapapamahchakwew - Wandering Spirit School, a Toronto District School Board school that offers culturally relevant education within Anishinaabe cultural traditions.

Elder Joanne Dallaire [VIRTUAL]

- It's been very interesting, at TMU, we take an entirely different process and look at how this happens. Signage is up all over the place. You can see our great pieces of art with the ring, with the big mural on the wall, and others all over the place. So, we are getting identity out there. We are being recognized that we are the first peoples of this land and that all people are newcomers to

this land.

- So, it's really important that kids in school, which they do because I work with the Urban Indigenous Education Council, and I sit as an Elder for the TDSB as well. And I'm very pleased to say that when we first started out, we didn't have secondary education. Now we do. Everything's at 16 Phin Street, we have a full program from kindergarten all the way up to grade 12 with graduation coaches. And students are really prepared to be successful in the mainstream education system.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Aasiyah Khan continues by sharing promising practices at the system-level, beginning with Peel District School Board's Anti-Islamophobia Strategy. She also shares about anti-Islamophobia training, family supports, advocacy, and Muslim Student Associations, also known as MSAs.

Aasiyah Khan

- So, we saw the first Anti-Islamophobia Strategy created at the Peel District School board. That's a huge systemic way that we can ensure that we're challenging some of these misconceptions and also putting in dynamic policies and practices to actually challenge Islamophobia.
- One thing I will share is when, as we engage with school boards across the country through training, obviously, we do a lot of anti-Islamophobia training, but we also provide a lot of advocacy support. So, what I mean by that is a lot of families, a lot of students reach out to us when they are in need of support. And that could be navigating the system. It could be challenging problematic curriculum. It could be many, many policies and practices that are in place. And so, we also assist in those pieces as well.
- Other things that we're noticing that are being done is creating spaces within Muslim communities to ensure that students feel like they're affirmed. So having an MSA, for example, at your high school. Having learning that looks at the unique intersections of Muslim identities. For example, at TDSB, we've been working in collaboration, and we've been doing some learning around what it means to be Black and Muslim and looking at that intersection. Because when we look at our community, anti-Black Islamophobia is a reality, right when we're looking at all of these layers

Host (Sejal Patel):

Next, Leora Schaefer shares about how Facing History & Ourselves Canada, a non-profit organization, uses lessons of history to support teachers and their students in challenging bigotry and hate.

Leora Schaefer

- At Facing History, we ask our teachers and our students to lean into what's difficult. And we know that equity work is hard work. In order to do this work well, and it's worth it, we need to truly listen to people with different lived experiences, different views of the world, and who walk in different shoes than our own
- We use lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate. And over the years of our organization and our establishment, through our approach to teaching history, we also have created a platform that we call Teaching for Equity and Justice. And that is the belief that each student receives what they need to develop their full academic and civic potential.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Panelists were invited to discuss challenges related to faith-based equity in schools. Elder Joanne Dallaire shares her reflections in this next segment.

Elder Joanne Dallaire [VIRTUAL]

- We didn't have until the last maybe 10 years at the most, any real push for us to get, as Indigenous people, a post-secondary education. Usually, as was the way with residential schools, we were just educated enough to be able to follow instructions, to read and write. So, we don't have a lot of resource for people who are educated, and who are professors.
- Our education system is not equitable. It was designed not to be equitable when Ryerson was asked to come up with an education system, he came up with an education system for boys, for girls, for Indigenous people, for Black people, for low economy. And the best education was given to the white males. And if we look around, we can see that it's still presented as males have more of the power positions than women. Right now, there's not an equity on that, but we're getting there.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Elder Joanne Dallaire's comments about inequities in our education system, point to the far reaching impacts of colonialism. Aasiyah expands on this, sharing about the implications of public displays of religion, along with the notion of religiofication.

Aasiyah Khan

- So, it's really important to think about the way a religion has been framed out. And it's mainly been framed and built on this very Euro-Christian, post-enlightenment understanding of religion with the advent of secularism. So, the issue here is religion comes to be reduced to what you believe in your heart, in private. And so often when we're thinking about Islam and we're thinking about Muslims, a lot of the practices that you notice that become problematized are the ones that are seen to be very public. So, for example,

my hijab seems to always come up in conversation, right. Right now, we have Bill 21 in Quebec where someone like me wouldn't actually be able to be an educator at a school board because of this piece of cloth on my head. So, I think we need to acknowledge the ways in which practice and the public display of some of the practices of our faith have been problematized.

- There's this term I recently learned, it's called religiofication. Has anyone heard this before? No? So this term basically tells us and reminds us of kind of this process that sometimes what we do is we tend to label a person when it comes to, for example, you see a Muslim student in your class, all you end up seeing is them as Muslim, and you kind of deny any other part of their identity. And this can cause a lot of harm, as we all know, right. Because we all have different kind of connectedness to our faith.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Leora Schaeffer builds on the concept of 'religiofication' that Aasiyah Khan introduced, describing the powerful imagery of individuals feeling like they have to 'zip themselves up' when they go out into the world, as a way of concealing their identities.

Leora Schaeffer

- John Amaechi talks about being 'zipped up' when you come to school because you can't share some part of your identity. Think about how exhausting that is. We might come to work zipped up, hiding, concealing. And that takes energy, that concealing, and you cannot do your best. And so, as educators, our role, our responsibility is to create spaces where students can actually unzip and be themselves and not work to conceal. And so, I wanted to invite us to think about why Jewish students might come to school zipped up.
- With rising rates of antisemitism right now, which is data driven, we know that it's a scary time for many students to come to school as a Jewish person, and particularly right now. We hugged before. It's a scary time to be Muslim and to be Jewish in schools right now.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Finally, panelists were asked about what actions can be taken by education stakeholders in enhancing faith-based equity. Elder Joanne Dallaire underscores the importance of representation, inclusion, and individual self-reflection.

Elder Joanne Dallaire [VIRTUAL]

- It's been very important for the children to be seen and be recognized for who they are, and to not have to worry about facing racism, or intolerance, or prejudice in the school system.

- So it's really important that every person can see themselves in everywhere that they walk in an education system, everywhere that people go within TMU, they should see themselves reflected. And it's not that people have an opinion, because everybody has an opinion on all kinds of things, especially when it comes to religious and spiritual practices. It's nobody else's opinion on what someone else believes, it's that you respect and that you listen. Discourse is a wonderful place to learn. We don't have to agree with someone to learn a great deal. But what I ask that each of you do, you move throughout your world. You recognize your own prejudice, your own preconceived ideas on various things that you will hear about today.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Students bring multiple identities into the classroom. Aasiyah Khan and Leora Schaeffer both discuss how considering intersectionality is important in working towards greater faith-based equity, and in the creation of safer spaces for all students in schools.

Aasiyah Khan

- Moving beyond this kind of Eurocentric understanding of religion, it's really important for us to think about and understand what it really means to support Muslim communities, and what it really means to support our students and staff, because, you know, it'd be really silly for me to be up here and tell you that support looks the same for everyone. Our community is extremely diverse. We are not monolithic. And so, I'm not going to be sharing kind of this list of things that you've got to do to make a perfect accommodation, a perfect space, because that doesn't exist. Right. The reality is our students are unique. The families that you serve are going to be really unique, and they bring really interesting histories. They have intersectional identities
- I think we have to acknowledge, kind of, the dynamic nature of faith within the Muslim community itself. It isn't monolithic. And so, acknowledging that allows us then to move beyond this process of religification, and allow us to see our students as Muslim *and* Black. Muslim *and*. Right. So, it's really important for us to kind of capture the fullness of our students through this process and really challenging that in our head.
- We need to be dynamic in our approach to challenging Islamophobia. Part of the work that goes into acknowledging faith is part of this equity umbrella, because we're asking students to bring their whole selves into a space. So, asking a student to deny their faith or to leave their faith at the door is totally unacceptable. Right. There's a difference between teaching and preaching. Right. And we have to acknowledge students in their fullness.

Leora Schaeffer

- There are Jewish people of colour, Jewish people in the complexity of your identities. It's intersectional. And so that's really important to keep in mind that you may not know you have a Jewish student in your classroom.
- What do we do? Curricular inclusion. Where are, let's pause and think about where elementary students might learn about Jewish people in the curriculum. Our government just announced a grade six mandate for Holocaust education. So, if you are only learning about Jewish people through a lens of trauma and persecution, what are the messages that we are sending people about what it means to be Jewish? What are we sending to our Jewish students in our schools? Actually take a look at that curriculum, because Strand A is really important. It actually talks about Jewish people in Ontario, contributions, how we came here, what we've done, what are the institutions, why we came here is an important part of it, but what has happened here - Jewish communities, living active Jewish communities, is really important. Thinking about the voices and representation. Who's telling the stories of Jewish people? And are you bringing, going back to that second slide, a diverse perspective on what it means to be Jewish and the many ways that Jewish students, that Jewish people identify and Jewish people who look different than I do. Bringing in voices of Jews of colour is critical at this moment. So, we don't perpetuate an ashkenazic normative way of thinking about what it means to be Jewish.
- Creating identity safe spaces. This is what Facing History does. Safe is not the right word. Brave. Courageous. Seen. We want our students, let's just use Dr. John Amaechi's words, unzipped spaces, where all students can be heard and seen, validated, where we can breathe.

Host (Sejal Patel):

Much gratitude to the panelists - Elder Joanne Dallaire, Aasiyah Khan, and Leora Schaefer, 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.