

## EP 04 - Supporting 2SLGBTQQIA+ Staff and Students

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:00]:

Today's topic may be challenging for different reasons, and while it is not our intent to cause anxiety or stress to anyone participating or listening, we acknowledge this may be the experience for some people. If needed, we encourage you to reach out for support to a trusted friend or colleague, another personal resource, or your organisation's employee assistance program.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:29]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:38]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:42]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:59]:

We hope that leadership talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy, and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:10]:

Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:18]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to Leadership Talks. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, one of your co hosts, and Susie and I are really excited today to welcome our guest, Barry Bedford, who is a centrally assigned principal with the Simcoe County District School Board.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:32]:

Great to have you join us in conversation today, Barry. We're going to get right into it, and I'm going to start by asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your role before we get into our topic for today.

Barry Bedford [00:01:42]:

I'm excited to be here. Thank you very much for the invite. I started with the Simcoe County District School Board about two years ago as a centrally assigned principal of diversity, equity, inclusion and multilingual language learners.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:55]:

Glad to have you on the show. I know that you've been doing lots of work around supporting 2SLGBTQ+ staff in your district, and we wondered if you would just tell us a little bit about some of that work that you're doing.

Barry Bedford [00:02:09]:

Sure. As an openly gay administrator, I've been very active in knowing what the experience was like for me in school, although that was a considerable period of time ago and I'm doing all the work that I can to assure that those students who do identify somewhere under the umbrella of 2SLGBTQ that they feel safe, welcomed and supported within the schools at all time. Since my arrival here in Simcoe, I've started the 2SLGBTQ staff affinity group because as difficult as it can be for gay students to fit in, it is equally difficult for staff in the sense of, sometimes parents, sometimes colleagues and such don't always necessarily feel that being open about your sexuality is appropriate within school so we've done what we can to increase the safety for staff and also students. We had last year a secondary all gender sexuality alliance conference. We are also the board, the first in Canada, actually, to hire a 2SLGTQ graduation coach specifically to support students in intermediate and secondary schools who are encountering some barriers due to their perceived or real sexual orientation or gender identity within our schools.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:03:35]:

So I can imagine in this role, Barry, particularly as you're supporting 2SLGBTQ plus staff, that you're encountering, I would imagine, some challenges in advocating and supporting staff. What are some of the strategies that you've used and that you've implemented that you've found particular success with and has been well received?

Barry Bedford [00:03:57]:

Well, that's a loaded question. Not always well received, but some of the strategies that we have used is, I think it's important for staff that being teachers, educational assistants, administrators, superintendents, if it's safe for you to be open, that you are gay or trans, lesbian, non binary, to do so, not out of being a token, but out of allowing students to see that there is success outside of the school, because oftentimes it's not safe for 2SLGBTQ students within their home. Oftentimes. And I'm not meaning to insinuate that it's physical safety, but it's emotional, it's spiritual safety. If parents, guardians, siblings are making derogatory comments when they see a gay character on tv, if there's something mentioned about equal rights, and you know you're part of that, it can be very difficult to truly be yourself at home. So if we can create safe enough

schools that allow students to be their whole selves at school, that can be life saving. And I know that based on the fact that I am also on the executive of Pflag Durham region. So I receive phone calls, numerous phone calls from families and such, where their child or the child themselves will call to say they are at risk of self harm or that somebody within the family has self harmed and they're looking for support.

Barry Bedford [00:05:31]:

So it's not that this is just a good thing to have in schools. It can actually be life saving if they at least know Monday to Friday they are honoured and respected for who they are. Some other strategies that have occurred, student specific, is by having a graduation coach for two 2SLGBTQ students. The students quickly learn that they have somebody that they can be themselves with, that they can share openly, that they can discuss situations, problems, and that it stays there if that's where they request it. That graduation coach reports to me, and they are very comfortable speaking with me because, in turn, I also get it, so we can have some great discussions, and when we know some of the things that are occurring within the schools, as a centrally assigned principal, I can reach out to that school to say, a student within your building has expressed the following. Oftentimes it's very complimentary about something that they love that's going on in the school, and I always love sharing those. But sadly, more often than that, it's a situation that the students find themselves in, where they're being put down either by peers or, in fact, by staff. And I then have the ability to go in there and kind of troubleshoot and assist in that capacity.

Barry Bedford [00:06:44]:

We've also been active in having all gender sexuality alliance conferences where the students get to come to the education centre. Last year, we were lucky enough to have Martin Boyce, who was one of the last surviving members of the Stonewall riots, which was kind of the start of gay pride as we know it, to have him come out so students could kind of learn the history, because students today kind of live in a world where they kind of feel as though the rights that so many of us fought for have always been here. So it was interesting for them to hear kind of the history of their culture, of the difficulty that it was back when it was illegal to be gay, back when you couldn't get married. Oftentimes students will see the wedding on my finger and just say, oh, you're married. That's kind of cool. How long you've been married? And I'll say. And they're like, oh, how long you've been with him? And I'll say, 32 years. And they'll go, oh, but you've only been married this long.

Barry Bedford [00:07:40]:

Why? And I'm like, because it wasn't legal to get married when we first met. And that just kind of blows their mind because the youth of today, that's always been a right that they've had. So it's interesting at times just having the dialogue when you're open and of a different generation where there's aspects of life today for students that they didn't know a decade ago didn't exist within the same capacity.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:08:09]:

Just picking up on that, Barry, you've mentioned the graduation coaches and the conferences that are really helping students, giving them some access points for support and to really kind of engage and feel included in the school community. What kinds of strategies or processes would you recommend for principals to support their staff in similar ways? Just what kinds of supports would they be able to access that would help them.

Barry Bedford [00:08:40]:

I think, again, it's visibility and actually talking about it. Teachers need to know that administrators have their backs, because if it's anything that we've learned recently, when we look at the demonstrations of September 20 and in October of parent groups actually against the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity within our schools, the difficulty sometimes isn't that things are said or done incorrectly. It's the fact that there's silence, that for fear of saying the wrong thing. Oftentimes, administrators and educators say nothing because they're afraid of potentially offending somebody who may identify as 2SLGBTQ or of potentially incurring the wrath of angry parent or guardian. So they say nothing. And that's the difficulty, because the experience of students and staff who identify as 2SLGBTQ is often of invisibility and silence. Students who are gay or lesbian simply don't exist because they have to hide who they are often at home, and then they have to hide who they are within the schools as well. And it's wanting to actually hear that there are gay teachers, that there are gay administrators to have within the curriculum, actually discuss gay leaders within the current situations and within the past, to actually know.

Barry Bedford [00:10:07]:

To have. When we're talking about the history of Canada, do we talk about the history of 2SLGBTQ rights in Canada? Do they know about the Brunswick Four? Do they know about the first gay mayor within Canada? Do they know when LGBTQ marriage rights began and the difficulty of creating that? Do they understand the challenges of adopting as a gay same sex couple? There's things like that that can be discussed within school, simply having forms that say parent one, parent two, or parent guardian one and two, as opposed to mother and father. Because for many families, that's not. And not just gay families, that kind of mom dad, 2.5 kids family isn't the regular family anymore. So, I mean, it's just seeing who children are represented within the schools. When we're bringing and engaging guest speakers, do we actively look for people from the marginalised communities to speak, but not about their identity? So if you're doing job fairs, those kinds of things, or bring in a lawyer who happens to mention his husband as he's talking in law class, where people go, oh, a gay guy could be a lawyer. It's those kinds where it's not always movie of the week that every time a gay man or a lesbian comes in to talk that they're talking about their sexual orientation, to realise that that's only one aspect of our identity, that's only one aspect of the student identity. And for schools to start treating and acting as though we are, in fact, whole people with families, lived experiences, likes, dislikes, and the ability to see ourselves represented within the curriculum represented on the walls of the schools.

Barry Bedford [00:11:57]:

Because I think schools are great for having 2SLGBTQ represented in June for Pride Month. And I think it's sometimes a surprise to them to realise that the other eleven months of the year, we're still gay. So it would be nice at meet the teacher night if some of the posters actually had same sex couples, had trans parents represented, had some things like that. And I'm not expecting every school to throw up rainbows. It's not that kind of thing. But it's just on the school newsletter, it would be nice to see single parents, same sex parents, different backgrounds, different identities represented. So it just becomes the norm and not something special that ends when July begins.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:12:45]:

You've given us so many things to think about and a lot of strategies to consider, but if there was one sort of key message from your experience for your colleagues listening to take away today, what would you want them to take away from this conversation?

Barry Bedford [00:13:04]:

The engagement of 2SLGBTQ population, both students, staff, and parents, has to be greater than performative. It takes more than posters. It takes more than wearing a rainbow bracelet. Gay rights and inclusion are something many school leaders don't have to think about, because they don't have to. They kind of wear blinders. And it's something that when a reminder on a calendar comes up that there's something to do with pride, they're like, oh, yeah, remember them? And then they're there. And I'm not for a moment insinuating that schools are homophobic, but the impact on students and staff when you don't see yourself supported. It's important to note that many homophobic incidences fall below the radar within schools, and that's often due to visibility management, because you can't necessarily go to complain about it without potentially outing yourself.

Barry Bedford [00:14:02]:

So sometimes students withdraw. They start not attending schools. Staff may leave a building if they don't feel safe there. And if you're not seeing evidence of support within a school, why would you expose yourself to potentially even greater risk at the school or the workplace? We oftentimes look to the data around student censuses and staff census and such, but students and staff who identifies to us LGBTQ often underreport this on surveys and census for fear of it being tracked back to us, even though they say it's anonymous. Is it? Because oftentimes when we're honest about our identity, we pay a price. I think students and staff can be upheld for the work that we do that make institutions look good, that make them look inclusive. But then when something goes wrong, the heterosexism of some agencies kick in and they look the other way or respond in anger when we go, but wait, the policy says this. And I think students and staff can oftentimes feel very targeted and very tokenized when it comes to some of these kinds of issues, where it's great that schools will put out these safe space stickers and that kind of thing, but then you will see educators walk by comments like, that's so gay in the hallway, and if it's behaviour you permit, it's behaviour you promote kind of thing.

Barry Bedford [00:15:37]:

So students quickly realise that, oh, the teacher is not going to stick up for that. So I can't actually be out here if there are comments like this, because it's difficult always feeling as though you're looked upon as a singular, that what students have expressed to the graduation coach and at conferences, that as soon as you come out, that's the whole you. You're no longer an athlete. You're no longer a scholar, you're no longer a sister. You're the gay kid. You're the kid in the GSA. It's difficult being seen as a whole person once you're known to be gay within the school systems.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:22]:

Thank you so much, Barry. We're coming to the end of our time, and I just want to just express some gratitude to you. First of all, I can hear the passion and emotion in your voice when you talk about these very real, important issues of human rights and inclusion. Certainly, obviously, very personal to you as well. And I would imagine that it's pretty powerful to have you as a role model, as an openly gay man in schools across the system, and I also want to acknowledge the burden that this role would have. And, again, just the gratitude for you coming on to speak with us. You've left us with so many powerful insights and realities for students and staff that we really need to think about. And so, again, thank you for the conversation today, helping us as school leaders across the province to intentionally include, advocate, and stand by our 2S LGBTQ plus colleagues and students to ensure that their dignity and well being are supported in authentic ways, not just a checkbox.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:29]:

I think that's one of the key pieces that's resonating for me as I walk away. So to our listeners, if you also want to share your story or highlight of your leadership journey, please check out our show notes on details on how to get the conversation started. And again, our gratitude to you, Barry, for being on with us today.

Barry Bedford [00:17:47]:

Well, thank you very much to both Susie and Lawrence. I've appreciated the opportunity to share some of this information again with the intent to know hopefully that as our 2SLGBTQ+ students continue to move through education systems, we continue to make them safe, welcomed, and to know that their identity matters and that they are important. So thank you very much for your time.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:18:11]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:18:23]:

If you have a passion or story to share as an educational leader or would like to find out more about the other amazing professional learning opportunities offered by the OPC, please visit our website by clicking on the link in the show notes.