

## EP 06 - Teaching Learning Walks and Rolls: Co-creating Learning

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:12]:

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

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:21]:

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:26]:

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

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:44]:

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. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:59]:

Well, it's great to be back, Suzy, for another great episode and a great conversation. I'm really looking forward to today. Joining us today is Dr. Beverley Freedman, who's a retired superintendent from Durham District School board, an educational consultant, a speaker, a researcher, and we're really excited to welcome you here today. Bev.

Beverley Freedman [00:01:19]:

I'm thrilled to be here.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:21]:

Thanks, Lawrence. Welcome, Bev. Before we get into the topic, can you share with our listeners a little bit about your leadership journey?

Beverley Freedman [00:01:29]:

Okay, so I began teaching the high end of high school in 1972. So that makes me old, but I have been involved in education since then. History, geography, I have a masters in each and there weren't a lot of women geographers, and that was really my pathway through to consulting, administration down to the ministry where I actually worked with young men in prisons, which was transformational for me. And provincial school superintendent, ten years in Durham, including with special ed. And that was very good because I myself am neurodiverse. I have dyslexia dysgraphia and I think borderline ADD, which means I like change a lot. And when I retired from Durham to York University, to the faculty back down to the ministry L & S as one of Avis's executive officers and a provincial diagnostician. And then a lot of research, working with OISE, with international teams and including the privilege of going to Chile, Belgium and Norway multiple times.

Beverley Freedman [00:02:59]:

Now I'm doing a variety of stuff, including some First Nations work and working with the Chiefs of Ontario around their systemic academic gap program.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:14]:

Thanks, Bev. I know that you've been doing a lot of thinking, writing, and perhaps even teaching about instructional leadership and the importance of gathering observational evidence of learning through learning walks. So can you tell us a little bit about how you got interested in this topic and some of the work and learning that you've been doing on this topic?

Beverley Freedman [00:03:38]:

Absolutely. So I'm a strong believer in intentional visibility because I've always believed, how do you know learning happening.? What does it look like? Where is the emphasis? And the same way that a coach of any team doesn't spend their life in the office. Coaches are with their team. I've always believed the teams are in school and it was part of my role to be observational but collaborative. So this is professional to professional. And I have done training and learning walks from Marzano, Elmore, Downey, anyone who offered it, as well as developed sort of my own style over the years. And in my time as an educator, I've probably literally been in thousands of classes.

Beverley Freedman [00:04:45]:

And it's always an issue of professional to professional. This is not about fixing anyone, and the emphasis is not teaching, but learning and working collaboratively with teachers to refine their own practices. And so it's something I'm quite passionate about.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:05:11]:

So, Bev, a couple of things you mentioned there: intentional visibility, and your analogy of coaching as a learner is really powerful. Are you able to share some practical ways that this happens, like what happens in the life of a leader within a school that really grounds their practice in this framework?

Beverley Freedman [00:05:30]:

Well, I thought that this topic was more appropriate in a post- COVID era because during COVID that visibility, that feeling of wandering in, began to cease. So we're in the next normal and rethinking about this as a practice. As a leader, what you think about is what are the critical pieces of learning, learning for your faculty and learning for the students, and how would you know? And so in terms of the way that I have done it, it's largely unscheduled. So even as a superintendent, the board knew Wednesdays I'd be wandering and they'd get a call in the morning because I didn't want anything formalised. And often we just took the school learning plan and look for evidence of it happening. The issue is to make the teachers part of the decision making process, because every piece of research says that teachers will be more committed when they, as professionals, are part of this decision-making process. I believe that learning walks are part of the role of a learning leader, to be able to have a sense of what learning looks like across classrooms. So it doesn't target one classroom or one grade or one subject. You want to create a tapestry of learning across classrooms.

Beverley Freedman [00:07:23]:

The visits are very short, about five minutes. I have a frame I use TIDE that was through the work of the Norwegian, so it became appropriate as an acronym. And it's the particular task. What are the students learning? The instructional strategies, the design of the classroom as learning space. And then the e is for engagement and looking at learning through the eye of the learner. So in this process, you're also talking to students, and you're beginning to create pictures of what learning looks like across the school so that you can have some collaborative feedback with teachers., and often this serves as another component that can be used in collaborative professional inquiry.

Beverley Freedman [00:08:23]:

So it's all about improvement. I have a particular passion for equity, so always for me, with an equity lens, and it's never judgmental. As I said, the work of a leader is to grow leaders. And so this is a tool that can be used to do that. And we have a short monograph to share if people are interested.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:08:53]:

Bev, I just want to pick up a little bit on one of the last things you just said there was about the connections to teacher learning. And I'm thinking, can you talk a little bit about either explicit or intentional ways that learning walks are connected to teacher learning processes? And I'm thinking, like you said, like collaborative inquiries or annual learning plans or teacher performance appraisals or those kinds of things. How are they connected?

Beverley Freedman [00:09:20]:

Yeah. So put aside the appraisals, because that's a whole body of research for another day. But in terms of learning. So what we would ask the teachers to do is to look at their learning plan, or in places like the Dominican Republic, where the school doesn't have a learning plan, and you say, tell me what you think the school collectively is doing well, and how would I know? So if I wandered into classrooms, what would be the indicators? So we're involving the teachers in what we're going to look at, and the indicators. Both of those are done deliberately. It's

metacognitive, it's intentional. And now these are things that teachers are thinking about. And it's rarely one person, often a learning team.

Beverley Freedman [00:10:20]:

And in many schools, teachers are involved in learning walks as well, if they can be free up. And what we're looking for is evidence. Okay, this is what teachers, the school said they're doing well, what is the evidence we see of this in terms of the learning? And are there things that we noticed that maybe people hadn't been as conscious of? And then we either bring staff back as a whole, or if it's a focus on a particular group, we'll bring back the group and we have a collaborative discussion. This is what we saw. And it's a snippet, right? It's just a snippet in time. What do you think? Let's have a discussion. And given this, is this an area given your collaborative inquiry we need to drill down on further? Maybe we're looking at a change and it all depends on what's coming up from what the observations are.

Beverley Freedman [00:11:35]:

So it's part of the evidence of learning and can be tied to many other pieces of evidence. I've also done it as a beginning when teachers, themselves, were very curious at the end of the day to divide teachers into multi grouping. So cross grades, cross subjects in small groups and start them off in different parts of the school and say you're looking for evidence of past, present and future learning. So go as a group and gather evidence and we'll come back and talk. And it's in the rich conversations that the learning happens.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:12:24]:

So Bev, the message about the power of these informal visits and these are, I use the word informal—I know there is quite a bit of structure and intentional planning behind these visits, although they are more casual in nature as well as the learning stance of leaders is so important, I think now more than ever we often hear that the best leaders are present, available, they demonstrate care, and I truly believe that part of that demonstration is about being visible. So what has your response been to the learning walks in your experience from staff and students?

Beverley Freedman [00:12:59]:

Teachers actually want administrators, their leaders in the classroom because they know that that's where learning actually happens. So the pre COVID, the research is that even people who aren't trained, high school principals who wander, tend to wander into the subject areas they themselves taught or experiential learning. And for elementary principals, they wander more frequently, often if they're having a bad day, into kindergarten or grade one, and also into experiential learning. And in both cases, there are classrooms they'd rather not go in and see. But in this case, because it's informal, because there's no judgement—we go into all learning spaces—the kids love it because we're talking to them and we're talking to them as learners. So I have a pattern I use with students. You know, tell me what you're learning, never what you're doing, because I think language matters.

Beverley Freedman [00:14:13]:

Why is it important to learn this? If I didn't understand it, where would I go for help? Who could help me? Is there something around the room that I could use as a cue? And I also question them about...often they're sitting in groups, sometimes the group, although they're sitting collaboratively, the work is independent. Sometimes it's collaborative. And I'm curious about how the groups form and how the kids feel about the groups. And you also have a sense of how effective the technology is being used. And so those are some of the things we think about. We think about voice and student voice because we know that that's critical. We think about classes being responsive to their community.

Beverley Freedman [00:15:10]:

And can I tell what the community is like if I wander the school and listen to the examples in the conversation? So that's part of the things that we do. And you're right, it's informal and structured. And the research says clearly that principals who are intentionally visible are viewed by their faculty with higher credibility.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:15:42]:

Thanks, Bev. There are a lot of things there for us to consider. You've given us lots of rationale for using this strategy or this approach. As a school leader, if there was one sort of takeaway message that you'd like to leave the listeners with—school leaders across the province about learning walks, what would that be?

Beverley Freedman [00:16:05]:

Well, you know, in true S & L form, I would say just do it as a learning leader yourself. This is part of the learning. This is walking, observing and talking. It's good as you're accumulating steps—we're all worried about accumulating steps—but it's also about building trust in relationships. Michael Fullen used to say to us, if there's no trust, don't be wandering into classrooms. So it's a way for you as a leader to demonstrate your credibility, your trusting relationship with your faculty, to show them that you're part of the learning process. You don't need to know everything.

Beverley Freedman [00:16:56]:

You know, I've gone into physics classes, and physics is not my background, but I still can learn and observe and in conversations with teachers, learn more. One of the questions sometimes I will say to a teacher is, if I had to pay attention to just one thing in the room, what would you like me to pay attention to and why? And there is, of course, no right answer, but it's all about unpacking teacher thinking. And so when you go through learning walks and you do them regularly, and so after a time, the teachers and the students don't even really know that you're there, then in the conversations you have with staff, professional to professional about improvement, you can give examples and sharing and help staff learn from one another and help the staff collectively learn. And so it's a reminder we are learning institutions and that's our primary goal.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:18:16]:

Well, those are words of wisdom. The whole idea of learning walks speaks to a very practical action that we can take in our schools to engage authentically with staff about students' learning, and keeping the learning of everyone, including the leader, central to our work. On behalf of Lawrence and myself and everyone who will access this podcast. Thank you for engaging in conversation with us, Bev, and giving our listeners a tool that they can take away and incorporate right away into their leadership practice. We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in all authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:19:01]:

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.