

Season 2 Episode 1 - OPC International Exchanges Program

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:10]:

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

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:19]:

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:23]:

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 [00:00:40]:

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 [00:00:58]:

So welcome back for another episode of Leadership Talks, the podcast where we explore professional learning, leadership and the power of connection. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer and today we're going to take it global. We're really delighted to be joined by a couple of people who are going to talk to about their experiences with the International Exchange Program. So today we're welcoming Lisa Piquette, who is a former principal and the current International Learning Lead for OPC. And we're also joined by Ana Mena, who is the principal of Dr. George Hall Public School with the Trillium Lakelands District School Board. So welcome to you both. Wondering if we could start off with maybe just introducing yourself a little bit and telling us a little bit about leadership journey up to this point.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:48]:

So Lisa, can we start with you? Welcome and hello.

Lisa Piquette [00:01:53]:

Hello Lawrence. And thank you to the team for inviting me to share today. I am a retired elementary school principal. I spent 22 years as an administrator with the Rainbow District School Board. I had a wonderful, amazing learning journey and career as a school based principal, as a system principal, I spent three years on second with the Ministry of Education and now in my retirement I've been two years working with OPC as the International Learning Lead, continuing my learning and my journey. And I am so happy to be able to speak to my colleagues across the province today to share with them the International Exchange Program.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:02:37]:

Thanks so much, Lisa and Anna, welcome and hello. How are you today?

Ana Mena [00:02:42]:

I am so excited to be here. Thank you for the invitation, Lawrence. I'm currently the principal at Dr. George Hall in Little Britain with the Trillium Lakelands District School Board and this is my 23rd year as being a principal and so proud to say I've participated in three exchange programs up to this point and just love the global perspective and the opportunities that it's allowed me to have. Very personalized professional development catered to my interests and from a global perspective. So thanks for inviting me.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:17]:

Thanks, Anna. We really appreciate you being here to share some of your thoughts and ideas about this. So, as mentioned, we're going to talk about OPC's International Exchange Program. This is a really immersive job- shadowing, kind of an experience where Ontario principals get to spend time learning from other school leaders in other countries like New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Italy and Ireland. And the program is set to do a little bit of an expansion in 2026 to include some new locations like Switzerland and Australia. So a very exciting learning opportunity, as Anna mentioned. And maybe I could just ask you, Lisa, to start us off and maybe give us a bit of an overview of the program and your involvement with it.

Lisa Piquette [00:04:02]:

Thank you, Lawrence. So, just to build on what you said about the exchange program, the International Exchange Program is a formalized exchange program and job-shadow initiative where Ontario school leaders are matched with principals from other countries. Most often, participants select the homestay option where the partners are hosted in each other's home for the week and are fully immersed in life and work as a principal in another country. It's not tourism, it's transformational. So I'm going to ask the listeners today to think about what happens when you leave your own school and step into another school halfway around the world. What will you learn, not only about others, but about yourself? So that is the magic of the International Exchange Program. It's not your average professional development. It's really about living the learning.

Lisa Piquette [00:04:57]:

So Ontario principals partner with international colleagues, shadowing them in their daily work, living in their homes and experiencing life as they do. So, the program is rooted in three main tenets. We think about shared knowledge, we think about the immersed learning, and we think about a personal inquiry based research approach. So I'm going to dive into each of these a little more with examples and most importantly, with voices of past participants. I could tell you about it, but to hear their voices is much more powerful. So the exchange program is professional learning fused with global connection and cultural immersion.

Lisa Piquette [00:05:43]:

So if you've never clicked that button on the OPC website under Professional Learning, it's called Global Opportunities. Well, let me tell you a little bit more. The OPC International Exchange Program offers participants the chance not just to observe, but participate, to engage in reflective conversations, and really to reimagine your own practices. And it's through this lens the exchange becomes more than a visit, it's a personal and professional reawakening, so to say.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:17]:

So that sounds like some really rich learning opportunities, Lisa. What are participants saying about their experience and their Involvement. You know, what kind of an impact is this having on their professional learning and practice?

Lisa Piquette [00:06:30]:

Well, again, Lawrence, that's where the magic happens. As the International Learning Lead for OPC, I have the privilege position not only of creating these exchange opportunities for OPC members, but I also get to hear all about their exchange experience afterwards. The experiences are usually so inspiring and invigorating that people are eager to share and want to share their experiences with me. So I get a lot of emails, I get a lot of phone calls and people are very excited and say, Lisa, I have to tell you all about this. So I've gathered some of the quotes because I write these stories down. So one experience, for example, and a participant who went to Denmark shared, "it's imperative that we as professionals continue to grow our practice from a different lens. One can attend all the PD in North America, but to live the learning, wow, I really had to get out of my comfort zone." So during exchange, participants don't just sit in meetings and observe from afar.

Lisa Piquette [00:07:35]:

This is real time leadership development and learning in action. So I invite you as listeners to picture yourself in these experiences. When you arrive, you're welcomed, perhaps by a whole school assembly in your home school, or you're shadowing a principal through classrooms in school in another country, or you're engaging with your partner in learning conversations about common problems of practice to brainstorm solutions. We really are finding, that all over the world, we have very similar problems and we can put our heads together and come up with solutions. You get to attend board level professional meetings maybe, or participate in supplemental school tours to neighboring schools to really see a variety of contexts of learning

in that country. And then of course there are all the learning opportunities outside of school. Participants engage in cultural activities, weekend excursions, family dinners.

Lisa Piquette [00:08:36]:

One participant even shared that running through the airport and missing a train was all part of the adventure. So here's another quote from a participant In Finland, "a highlight was living in the same house and driving in the same car. I was able to ask questions as they came into my head. The interaction was invaluable. My partner was open, welcoming and patient. Instead of reading articles or taking a course, I would have real time conversations and understand the nuances of these learning systems." Or how powerful is this quote? "I felt rejuvenated. Children are the same everywhere but the ways they're taught.

Lisa Piquette [00:09:19]:

That's where the wonder lies." I have to admit that quote gives me shivers when I think about the wonder of learning. So we know that leadership is often about pausing and asking better questions. I encourage participants to research the education system of the country where they're visiting and come prepared with a list of questions you're curious about. So here's another voice from the field, "coming prepared with a lot of questions. After researching the country's perspective of my topic, I was able to engage in deeper conversations." So that idea of inquiry, of reflecting on what you want to learn about and posing thoughtful questions that are meaningful to your own learning and context, is part of the application and the matching process. So school leaders are asked to identify their learning goals and formulate an inquiry question to guide the learning.

Lisa Piquette [00:10:16]:

This leaves the focused, just right learning and meaningful application to your own school and context back here in Ontario. By being able to set the direction of the learning, participants describe feeling re centered, refreshed and inspired to bring change back home. When you get to participate as a learner in an international exchange, you're not just visiting a school. You're stepping into a mirror held up by another system. And as one principal reflected, and I quote, "I began to question some of my own professional practice. And that questioning led to real change." So I just want to emphasize that this is a personal learning journey. The matching isn't random, it's personalized.

Lisa Piquette [00:11:07]:

And participants are paired based on, first of all, the country of preference. From the roster where you want to visit and learn, professional learning goals that we talked about just a few minutes ago, you're asked to elaborate on your school focus areas, and that helps with matching the other principals learning as well. We ask you to share your school demographics. And then of course, there's an area where you're asked to share your personal interests. I call this the icing on the cake to make the best partner matches possible. And yes, you can even bring and host a family member if you wish. This really does happen quite frequently.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:48]:

Well, those are some great quotes, Lisa. And clearly there are lots of really great experiences that are being had by principals who engage in this program. Although today we have the good fortune of having Anna with us and we can hear directly from a participant, a former participant in the program, and get, you know, sort of firsthand report back from, from Anna about her experience in the program. So in 2024, Anna traveled to New Zealand as part of the Exchange program. And one of her quotes is, I went hoping to find out how they integrate indigenous teachings into the education system. And after the exchange, Anna shared, "I left there being spiritually changed." So clearly it's had an impact on you, Anna, and I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about your experience.

Ana Mena [00:12:41]:

Thank you so much, Lawrence. I love hearing those words echoed back to me, especially now when we're in the business of May and June and school is so overwhelming at times, with the demands, I was spiritually transformed and continue to be. I gave some thought about how I could share that with your audience. And I thought the best way to describe the transformation is through the story of why and how a beautiful framed print came to be hanging in our staff room. If I could describe it, it's like a beautiful Maori woodcut style. It's a relief print. It's got an abstract design of swirling deep red leaves, which kind of suggests movement and growth. And it is handmade by a student.

Ana Mena [00:13:31]:

So while I was at Hillcrest Normal School in New Zealand, I was invited to a celebratory assembly for the Maori youth. And they're referred to in their language as Tamariki. So these Tamariki youth had participated in a carving class under the guidance of master Maori carver Mata Re. The Tamariki were given the opportunity to design and carve their stories into a taonga. In Maori culture, a taonga is a treasured possession. Whether it's tangible or intangible, it holds deep cultural and historical significance. So it's more than just a physical object. It represents a person's identity, their family history, and a connection to the natural world.

Ana Mena [00:14:18]:

So the assembly marked the completion of the taonga, and the Tamariki presented it to a significant person in their lives. So my plan going in was to sit quietly at the back of the audience and appreciate the celebration of the tamariki and their families. My principal partner, Mary Bramley, was setting up and greeting family members. And while that was happening, Manta Ray, the master carver, came over to speak with me. And little did I know that this small gesture would create this massive domino effect of events to come. And totally ended my spectator role at the celebration. He generously invited me to sit on the stage and be part of the ceremony. I confess I was totally ignorant to the Maori culture and customs.

Ana Mena [00:15:07]:

I asked him what he wanted me to do and how I should do it. So he gave me the job to greet each Tamariki and present them with a certificate of accomplishment. Nervously, after kind of practicing it, I agreed. And if you don't know, the Maori greeting that I was to do is called a Hongi. And so it's a traditional practice. So whereas in North America we shake hands, the

Hongi it...Well, you can shake hands, and at the same time, you press your nose and your foreheads together. And it symbolizes the sharing of breath and a spiritual connection between the people doing the greeting.

Ana Mena [00:15:47]:

It's a gesture of respect, unity, welcoming, and it's often done during formal ceremonies. So I participated in that part. And the other part that was so moving was that, as I said on the stage, I felt this deep impact of not only connecting with them, with the Hongi, but also listening to each child speak to the audience and their families. And they were to share what challenges they overcame and what they learned while they were carving. While they did that, they stood in front of all their community. And then at the end, they walked down from the podium and presented their taonga to a significant family member in their lives. One Tamariki gave it to her grandmother. Another walked towards his older brother to present the taonga.

Ana Mena [00:16:38]:

And then I watched the older brother do this little flick of his head and nod towards his father. And. And with that little flick, I saw that he acknowledged that the younger brother wanted to give him the gift. And yet they both recognized that it should be given to the father. And that heart that he gave at his brother. Just to say, I acknowledge you and I want this to go to our dad. It wasn't lost on me sitting through that. My eyes welled up and I'm welling up telling you this.

Ana Mena [00:17:13]:

I felt their journeys and gratefully, I was wearing a scarf around my neck, looked great on the outfit. But it also had the other effect of being able to use, to be used to wipe the tears in my dripping nose at that moment. I sat there feeling the moment and being part of the ceremony. And Manta Ray was sitting beside me. And you know, as children walked down to the audience or there was a lull, he would share some deep thoughts while sitting beside me. And he noticed my tears and he just acknowledged it by saying, in their culture, emotions are meant to be felt and expressed, not suppressed. And later on that evening at dinner with my principal partner, she said she was about to put a reassuring hand on me, but she thought it might cause me to cry harder, so she held back. In the audience, the deputy principal and assistant principals were also crying and getting teary eyed, knowing the enormity of that moment for the students that were presenting their taongas to their families.

Ana Mena [00:18:19]:

Manta Ray also watched my eyes while I was on stage. And he noticed that I was looking at the Tamariki on stage. And just like the ones in North America, they're hardly able to sit still. And he just looked at me, waved his hands and said, where there's movement there's life. And I think about that moment often when I run welcome to kindergarten evenings or different assemblies. Where there is movement, there is life. Later on during the ceremony, he said his goal of the carving program was when the lure of gangs and easy money called some of these youth. He hoped the sense of belonging and purpose at the Maori community and school built together with a carving program would override the negative path, or at least bring them back one day to the right path.

Ana Mena [00:19:10]:

My principal partner, Mary Bramley, in appreciation and respect during that ceremony, presented mature with a student created print that now hangs in our staff room entry. In Maori culture, the richest are those who give away their gifts. And Manta Ray exemplified that through he presented the print to me for me to remember my visit and the impact we have on our youth, whether it's in New Zealand or in North America. I'm not embarrassed to say that the tears flowed so hard at that point that I was unable to even voice the words thank you as I stood in front of them all. I tried. I tried. I couldn't. I felt it, but I couldn't speak it.

Ana Mena [00:19:57]:

Ten months later, as I tell you this, I'm still able to feel that moment. My voice is getting a little bit raw. The goosebumps and the powerful feeling of community is still there. On the back of that print that hangs in our staff room, there's a photo of the students, carvers and the signatures of the Maury children and Maury carvers who participated in the program at my host school, Hillcrest Normal School in New Zealand. Also on the back of the art is a message from master carver Manta Ray, written in the Maori language that says Tene teroha nui, which translates to this is a sign of love. This is a sign of love. So when my principal partner, Mary Bramley, came to visit my school in Canada at a staff meeting, we both told the story of the print and the gift of love to my staff from the other side of the world. It's framed and hangs in the entrance of our school staff room as a visual reminder and inspiration for all that work here.

Ana Mena [00:21:03]:

To me, it's a constant reminder that what we all do at school for our students, families and each other every day is a sign of love.

Lisa Piquette [00:21:14]:

Thank you, Anna. I. I truly get shivers each time you tell your story. And yours, I know, has an epilogue which we don't have time to get into. But I know you met up with your participant again quite haphazardly in Banff and had an opportunity to do extended time and travel with her as well again. And your story is just one of many from participants who have gained valuable insights and created lasting professional networks and friendships. So what happens when other exchange participants come back? They tell me they feel more relaxed, a more student centered leadership style. They feel greater encouragement of outdoor play and nature based learning.

Lisa Piquette [00:22:00]:

They feel a renewed appreciation for teacher voice and deeper questioning of entrenched practices. And to be simply more laid back, as one leader put it, so that that ripple effect is real. One more participant quoted about the impact of their learning. Just the chance to develop professional friendships and see the similarities and differences in systems. It challenged my thinking and I love that term, professional friendships. I feel I create this with the partners I work with.

Ana Mena [00:22:35]:
With.

Lisa Piquette [00:22:36]:

When I get to set up the exchange roster. My contacts in our international partner countries have become my new professional network and friends. And my life is enriched by having these people I can reach out to across the world because we talk about education, but we talk about lots of things also. So the exchange participants create these same professional friendships, as my friend Christina from Italy likes to call them. In fact, I could share many examples of exchanges that have led to multiple subsequent visits with entire families traveling to visit each other.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:23:11]:

So if you're thinking about the kinds of conversations that you've had with people participating in the program, you know, what are some of the pieces of advice that the alumni would share with other principals and vice principals who might be thinking about participating?

Lisa Piquette [00:23:27]:

That's a great question, Lawrence. So here's what past participants want others who are interested in the exchange program to know. They say, come prepared, do your research and bring lots of questions. Stay extra time if you can. If you could add an extra few days, or in the case of Australia and New Zealand, where the travel happens in the summer, stay an extra week if you can. The time flies by and I love this one. Be ready to say yes to everything from day one. Just cherish every experience that you can get.

Lisa Piquette [00:24:06]:

So we know that international travel and living with another school leader and spending time in someone else's school is not always smooth. You know, for example, in New Zealand, we learn that kindness is leaving people to wander and discover the school, as opposed to Canadian kindness, which is taking you around the school on a guided tour. So sometimes the learning is unpacking the different cultural understandings and not making assumptions. So it's about bringing a flexible, open mindset. There might be language barriers, there may be travel hiccups, but the rewards are immeasurable. So if something sparked inside you today, you're not alone. This is more than a travel opportunity. It's a movement of reflective, engaged, globally minded school leaders.

Lisa Piquette [00:24:58]:

This exchange program is designed with a tools, not rules approach. It's individualized to meet participant needs. Our New Zealand colleagues said it best with this Maori indigenous proverb that they shared with me. With your basket of knowledge and my basket of knowledge, the people will prosper. So that's what this program is all about. It's learning together, growing together and sharing the journey. So if you're interested in learning more details about the 2026 international exchanges, I invite you to visit the OPC website under Professional Learning and

then click on Global Opportunities and then click on International Exchanges. And we expect the roster for 2026 to be up and open by mid July.

Lisa Piquette [00:25:53]:

I also invite you to send me an email at Globalopportunitiesprincipals@ca. It's on the website as well, Globalopportunitiesprincipals@ca. And I would be happy to answer any questions or connect you with a previous participant if you want to chat. So thank you very much Lawrence for allowing Anna and I to share this really rich professional learning opportunity today.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:26:23]:

Well, I want to take an opportunity here to thank you both for joining us today and sharing this wonderful information and Anna for sharing obviously some very moving and deeply meaningful experience experiences that you've had as part of the program. We, we really appreciate you being here today and we, we hope that listeners are going to find a way to to engage in the program. So thanks very much. We appreciate your time.

Ana Mena [00:26:50]:

My pleasure.

Lisa Piquette [00:26:51]:

Thank you Lawrence. Thank you. Anna.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:26:56]:

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