

EP 08 - Leveraging Student Voice through Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

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-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

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

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]:

Good day everyone and thanks for joining and hi Susie. Glad to be back with you. I'm really looking forward to our conversation today with Andrea Carnegie from Peel District School Board, who's going to be sharing her work on creating opportunities for student voice and engagement.

Andrea Carnegie [00:01:17]:

Hi Lawrence, good afternoon. Hi Susie. Good afternoon. I'm excited to be here and to be joining you and to get this opportunity to have some conversation with you about my journey and basically what I do at McCrimmon to leverage student voice and to make sure that students are successful at school.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:40]:

So welcome. A warm welcome to you Andrea. This is actually one of my favourite topics—culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy and student voice. So before we hear more about that, could you share a little bit about yourself and your leadership journey?

Andrea Carnegie [00:01:53]:

I started out as a teacher with the Peel Board approximately 21 years ago and so I have taught from grades two to grade eight. I've also held two central roles with the board previously to becoming an administrator, one as a literacy numeracy school success teacher and another one as an instructional coach. I believe that my basic journey as a teacher and the central roles that I've held have really prepared me for The type of school that I lead.

Andrea Carnegie [00:02:27]:

And the type of leadership that I envision before becoming an administrator. As a teacher, I was always interested in project-based learning and problem-based learning because I have always had a belief that students are creative. And when I create opportunities for students in the classroom to be engaged, to have agency and ownership over their own learning, I noticed a change in their behaviour, I noticed a change in the level of engagement, I noticed a change in the level of buy-in, and I noticed a change in improvement. And so this type of teaching and learning, this type of philosophy has always driven me, have always inspired me. And when I became an administrator, I already knew the type of school that I wanted to lead and it was a school that ensured that students had a say in how they learn, what they learned and when they learned it. And so this is my, I would say, third year as a school principal leading the wonderful school of McCrimmon. This is my second year at McCrimmon. And we have been doing some amazing work around student identity and making sure that we're grounding, teaching and learning through student voice.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:47]:

That's great, Andrea, and I know you've been doing lots of thinking and work on creating these identity affirming school spaces and really working to increase opportunities for student voice, especially for students who have not traditionally had those kinds of opportunities. So can you tell us a little bit more about some of the work and the specific strategies and leadership moves that you've been working on to enhance those things?

Andrea Carnegie [00:04:12]:

I really like the fact that you brought up the fact that it's very important that we elevate student voices, especially the voices of students who have been traditionally marginalised. And basically, at McCrimmon, we serve a very diverse school population. We have approximately 67% of our students identify as South Asian. Approximately 20% of our students at McCrimmon identify as Black. So you can just imagine how important it is at McCrimmon for us to make sure that the voices of students who have been traditionally marginalised, who have been traditionally left out of the school system is elevated. And one of the ways in which we do it at McCrimmon is making sure that we teach and learn through a culturally responsive lens. So this is something that I firmly believed in, especially being an immigrant myself, and understanding

the importance of seeing myself reflected and represented in the curriculum. And so this is something that I emphasised with my staff.

Andrea Carnegie [00:05:17]:

So one of the ways in which we do it at McCrimmon is basically looking through a culturally responsive lens and bringing student voice and student identities at the forefront of learning. It's very, very important that at the end of the day, that students feel affirmed, that they feel respected, that they feel valued, that they feel that the curriculum speak to themselves.

Andrea Carnegie [00:05:42]:

And nobody does it better than Zaretta Hammond. And Zaretta Hammond talks a lot about, you know, teaching through a culturally responsive lens. She has a book, Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain. And a lot of times when we talk about culture, we sometimes think that culture is only beliefs and values and traditions. But culture at McCrimmon for us is much more than that. It's the things that we believe inspire students. It's the things that we believe motivated students.

Andrea Carnegie [00:06:12]:

It's the things that we believe engage the brain. So when we teach and learn through a culturally responsive lens, at McCrimmon, we want to make sure, we make sure that the idea of culture is very...is broadened...and so bringing in students' identities, okay, is very, very important, and we bring it at the forefront. And another text that we use to make sure that this happens is Goldie Mohamed's text. And she talks about, you know, the historical responsive literacy. That is one of the framework that I introduce to my staff, and this is one of the framework that grants teaching and learning. And Goldie Mohamed's talks about five pursuits and the five pursuits that are very important to how students receive literacy, perceive instruction.

Andrea Carnegie [00:06:59]:

One of those pursuits is actually identity.

Andrea Carnegie [00:07:01]:

How do we bring identity to the forefront? How do students, through the curriculum, can learn more about themselves, but also learn about others? She also talks about skills. So how are students learning the curriculum? How are students learning these skills? And how do students believe that they can take these skills and turn it into transferable learning? And so these are the opportunities that we allow for students at McCrimmon. When students see themselves reflected through teachers' ground in teaching and learning, through their identities, giving them opportunities to learn about themselves and others, making sure that the curriculum comes to life through skills. So it's just not teaching the curriculum, but how are what students learning inspires them to basically make sure that they can create something that they can decide on. How are they going to demonstrate their learning? So I think that's one of the important things that we do at McCrimmon. And I spoke earlier about being in a podcast studio. One of the other areas that was very, very important to us is making sure that when we come here, that the

learning environment is very key to how students learn. I know the Peel District School Board, Lawrence, you were part of the Peel District School Board.

Andrea Carnegie [00:08:18]:

You know about the Empowering Modern Learning document. And you know that the learning environment is just one of those key elements of ensuring that we're being responsive to how students learn and how students are engaged, and as a result, how engagement and learning go hand in hand to impact student achievement. So that was one of the things that we were intentionally basically focusing on. How can we change the learning environment to basically respect, reflect student voice, but gives opportunities for students to feel empowered, to feel elevated? So we listened to our students at McCrimmon, and one of the spaces that they were asking for were spaces that They believed that they could go to in the school to just be in charge of their own learning.

Andrea Carnegie [00:09:10]:

So at McCrimmon, what we did as a staff, with the help of my staff, reimagined our central library learning space, and we turned it into an innovative, creative learning centre. We call it the CLC for short Creative Learning Centre, a very innovative space equipped with the latest podcast studio. We have a fabrication lab. We have a gaming area. We have a quiet area where students can actually read books. And we also have a collaborative learning centre, and basically, we are very proud of this learning space because we believe that it's a hub of our school, and we believe it's a space that students can come to to basically be in charge of their own learning.

Andrea Carnegie [00:09:53]:

So I'm giving an example. So a student is in the classroom, they're doing a novel study, and they might believe that, you know what? I don't necessarily want to basically write a book report. I want to come to the podcast studio and create a podcast. I want to interview a friend, I want to interview a teacher, or I want to basically, we're doing some learning around sustainability, and I'm speaking from some of the projects that our students are working on right now. I want to design a robot or a prototype of something that can clean up our learning environment. So these are some of the opportunities that we really offer. We really provide our students at McCrimmon to really elevate their voice, to really empower them to have ownership and agency over their learning.

Andrea Carnegie [00:10:47]:

And we see great things happening at our school. I think I alluded to the fact that our students are highly engaged, and as a result of the learning environment, as a result of grounding our teaching and learning through a culturally responsive lens, we have really changed. I would say the culture of McCrimmon, and McCrimmon basically is just like a thriving learning hub where students are fully engaged and achieving. And this is all through our response, you know, to what students say, how they learn, and what they want to learn.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:25]:

Thanks, Andrea. I really like how you're putting such intentional focus and thought into the learning environment and really enhancing that student agency through that.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:11:37]:

So, Andrea, it sounds like you're making learning fun over there at McCrimmon, which is great to hear. As educators and leaders, I think we're on our own learning journey around CRP. What are some of the practical leadership actions that you have found the most impactful in supporting educators along this journey? Because I would imagine people are at different places.

Andrea Carnegie [00:11:59]:

Yes, I think that's a very, very important question. I definitely know for myself coming into a new school like McCrimmon that needed some changes, and students were sharing with me that changes were needed. Staff were sharing with me that changes were needed. It was very, very important that there was some leadership moves that, you know, are in place. And I definitely know that one of the leadership moves that I find very helpful, and I think other administrators listening would probably agree, is just making sure that you have the right staff in place. It's very important that when you're coming in, especially, you know, for myself, coming into a school and you have vision and you envision what, you know, like a school, like a vibrant school, a school where students are fully engaged, where students feel affirmed and valued, that you have the staff, the right staff in place.

Andrea Carnegie [00:12:56]:

And it may take some very difficult leadership moves because sometimes you want to move people around in terms of where you see fit, and there are times when staff may not see the big picture. But that was one of the moves that I found very helpful, very successful at McCrimmon, was just making sure that the staff that I believe could best fit the vision that we had was fully in place so that that vision could be implemented. Another thing that I really find very helpful with what a lot of administrators find nowadays, especially with the challenges that we have in terms of providing professional learning. And you have seen the article that OPC had just produced in terms of shortages, whether it's teacher shortages, EA shortages, and really providing staff with professional learning that they need in order to make sure that you can implement the vision and implement—you can build capacity. So I think it's very important that at some point, as administrators, that we understand that one of our big roles is to be an instructional leader in the school. I know that we have our challenges in terms of, you know, like, with the operational demands of the job, but it's first and foremost, we're instructional leaders, and that's always in the back of my head that in the school, I'm an instructional leader. So I have to model that. But I also have to make sure that my staff have the capacity to basically carry out the vision, but also the capacity to support each other and to make sure that teaching and learning is taking place at the optimal level.

Andrea Carnegie [00:14:38]:

So I think it's very important that, you know, like, professional learning is provided for staff. And I also make sure, you know, that happened. I think another leadership move are the student themselves. And so it's very important that you're.

Andrea Carnegie [00:14:56]:
Always speaking to the students.

Andrea Carnegie [00:14:58]:
One of the things that we had at McCrew last year was a student town hall, and the purpose of the student town hall was to basically raise up students to be their own researchers and facilitators in the school.

Andrea Carnegie [00:15:11]:
So the students were trained to be facilitators and researchers, and they conducted their own town hall, have conversation with students about what you think makes a successful school.

Andrea Carnegie [00:15:22]:
And we're always looking for opportunities to make sure that student voices are heard. And for me, as a school leader, as a principal, it's very important that student voices lead the forefront of what we do at McCrimmon. So I would say, number one, ensuring that you have the right staff in place is very, very important. You may have to do some moving around. Some staff may not like it, you know, but eventually, if you're a great school leader, your staff will always come on board. Number two, it's very important that we understand that we're instructional leaders in our school at the forefront. So we have to model that, and we have to make sure that the staff sees that.

Andrea Carnegie [00:16:04]:
And a part of that is providing those ongoing professional learning that staff need, even with the challenges of, you know, basically operationalizing a building. And number three is making sure that we're always eliciting student voice at the forefront of, you know, of how the school works. And I can tell you for me, how important student voice is.

Andrea Carnegie [00:16:04]:
Like, I'm always calling students in my office, tell me how we can make the school better. You know, I have a new student who comes into the school and, you know, like, I've seen some improvement. I noticed that you're doing a great job. Do you think that there's something else that we can do? I'm always eliciting student voices, whether it's through formal, you know, like surveys through town halls or even just having one on one conversation about students, you know, with students, in terms of how we can make the school a great place.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:16:56]:
Well, thank you, Andrea. You've given us so many really concrete examples. I really enjoyed hearing about the many ways that you are engaging student voice and elevating their agency across, you know, a number of different strategies that you're using. I'm sure that our listeners

are going to take a lot away from this conversation and be able to apply that to their own context.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:56]:

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.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:32]:

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.