

## EP 09 - Neuroaffirmative Human Rights Informed Practice

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 [00:01:00]:

Hi Susie, it's great to be back with you again and looking forward to today's episode. I think it's going to be a great conversation. We're going to be welcoming Karen Timm here today from Durham District School Board, and she's going to be talking to us a little bit about neuroaffirmative practice, which I'm really looking forward to hearing what she has to share about that.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:22]:

Thanks, Lawrence. Me too. Welcome, Karen. It is great to have you with us today.

Karen Timm [00:01:28]:

Thank you.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:29]:

So before we hear about your area of expertise and passion, and anyone who has spoken to you about this topic of neurodiversity would know that you certainly have a passion. It'd be helpful to hear a little bit about your journey and who you are today as a leader.

Karen Timm [00:01:44]:

Sure. Thank you. And thank you for the opportunity. Certainly it is a passion, but I'll just share with you that I am a school leader here in Ontario. And ironically, I didn't get into education to become a school leader. When I reflect back on my journey as an educator, as human, leadership kind of found me. I know that many have said that to me as well in terms of their journeys. But when I started my career teaching in Toronto, I kept getting selected to lead in a variety of capacities.

Karen Timm [00:02:19]:

I was a mentor, I was a SERT, working with the university, adjunct, professor, chairperson, teacher-in-charge, all of those sorts of things. And then even later on at the district level, when it came to bringing in new teachers, and then the rest is history. So it's almost like that pathway evolved and developed. And then when I migrated out to the Durham region, that's where I've been for about two thirds of my career., the bulk of that time has been spent in educational leadership and throughout this time in two different boards. I've had the fortune of working in a real variety of schools across the GTA, and each of them has been very unique, very unique cultures, very unique challenges and of course, very unique strengths. And then most recently, I've had the opportunity to co-lead our K-8 online school, which is, as I say, my current position. The one thing that I do want to point out as well, a huge part of who I am and what I try to remind myself each and every day.

Karen Timm [00:03:22]:

Like many administrators and educators that I know, I'm perpetually on a journey to balance the demands of work alongside what I feel is really my most important role, which is that as a parent to an awesome human.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:36]:

Thanks, Karen, appreciate that. I think balance, we all need to talk more about strategies for keeping balance, there's no question about that. But we do want to probe in a little bit on some of the work of passion that you're involved in. And I know you want to share a lot about your work in neuroaffirmative practice. And I think for our listeners, first of all, they're going to want to know what that means and certainly will want to know how that is or can show up in educational spaces. So can you help us a little bit and just kind of explain what you mean by that?

Karen Timm [00:04:12]:

Absolutely. So I think for as long as I can remember, I've been very passionate about all things equity and social justice related, even from when I was a young child, advocating for a variety of causes, whether it was environmental or human rights based, and I became very interested early on in my career to understand behaviour, to understand why people do what they do. I was always observing and wondering, hypothesising about the interactions I was witnessing or things I was hearing about as people were coming to me to support them or inquire about what to do in certain situations. So that always became an essential part of who I was as an educator,

later as a leader, but first and foremost as a human. What I've really learned is that recognizing those patterns, the trends, the complexities of interactions, has really had an impact on students, educators and families. What I was seeing is that even those who have the best of intentions may have been impacting their students or colleagues in ways that they were not intending to. And so when I reflect on my life journey, I realise now that this curiosity about human behaviour and communication was always there in one form or another, as I was myself, navigating relationships, friendships, interactions, events—like all things human.

Karen Timm [00:05:39]:

And to this day, my mind never stops. This perpetual cycle, receiving information, organising it, making all these connections, and then those things inform my thinking and practice, not just in education, but just like, constantly. But in my schools, this has helped me to really dissect and unpack interactions amongst people, build connections and find common ground, like problem solving and amplifying voices who have been historically marginalised, identifying untapped talents and really thinking in ways that foster success, but are doing it in ways where we're charting new territory frequently. And so that means I'm an outside of the box thinker, as some people would call it. Right? And even though this is seen as an asset by many, it can also be really confusing and even scary for some who don't understand. Regardless of strengths and talents, students and educators who are seen as different, or in this case, we're talking about neurodivergence.

Karen Timm [00:06:40]:

So for those of us who may identify as neurodivergent, we can be excluded. We can be afforded limited opportunities because there's a lot of assumptions made about capabilities. We can be bullied as children and even as adults because power imbalances in society and systems favour what is seen to be normal. Right? I use the air quotes. Right? So those power imbalances are favouring what's seen to be normal. And if you are someone who's neurodivergent and you are also part of a group who's otherwise marginalised, the impact can be exponentially worse. What we're hearing about and seeing about in the research that continues to evolve, is that many of the challenges neurodivergent humans, and specifically we're talking about neurodivergent educators and students, many of the challenges that we're facing in schools are often not related to our innate differences, but rather to how these differences are perceived by the majority and how our needs are not yet, I like to say, yet.

Karen Timm [00:07:50]:

Right? They're not yet understood by this system that was built to educate. It's not a blame game. I always remind people this is not about blaming a system. A system exists and it develops, and it's very hard for it to align with research that continues to evolve, often very quickly. And policy change, we know, takes time. Unlearning takes time. Culture building takes time.

Karen Timm [00:08:18]:

But in the meantime, while there is this dissonance, we have to really recognize that what we've been taught in teacher education programs, in AQ courses, in the professional development that may be available, that is not aligning with what neurodivergent humans are experiencing. It's not for lack of trying. It's just that the learning that we're still being asked to do is often based on outdated research and practice, and it often has not been authentically informed by those of us who are neurodivergent. So that dissonance has really led to a lot of soul searching and wondering for myself, but also for many who are neurodivergent educators that I've connected with, wondering, where do you fit in, right? In a setting that wasn't built for your needs. And so it goes without saying that finding community is really essential. But building that community where you feel safe, where you feel understood, and there are people there that resonate with you has actually been very life saving for many. So that's where the need for neuroaffirmative practice comes in.

Karen Timm [00:09:34]:

Neuroaffirmative practice, essentially is neurodiversity aligned. Right? And we could get into all of the nuances of the language in terms of definitions and that, and we could be here for days and days and days just to sort of shift language. There's a lot of terminology that gets shared, but people don't necessarily understand some of the nuances, so we don't have the time to go into those pieces right now. But I think one of the key pieces— there's so much understanding that has to be built in terms of what does it mean to be neuro affirming or neurodiversity affirming, aligned to that notion that neurodiversity is a type of diversity. It's about understanding that we're all different, but it's also about how do we ensure that all of these differences are not seen on a continuum of rating scales. Right. And it's very hard to do that when we have a whole variety of systems that work together to diagnose and to see things based on what somebody can't do.

Karen Timm [00:10:56]:

And in education, we are really trying hard to be thinking about growth mindset and looking at assets as opposed to deficits. Every human has assets. Every human has things that are great about them, that they really have strengths, talents. Some people refer to them as gifts, but everyone also has challenges, right? And when we see those things as deficits or when we rate those as one way of communicating is better than another, we're really not doing justice to that diversity that exists within the human species. And without that diversity across all layers of our identity, we're not doing justice to our species as humans. But anyway, that sense of community is a really key piece to why a number of years ago, I was part of a very small group who formed what we've called the Neurodivergent Affinity Network of Educators. It's an affinity network of educators that exists.

Karen Timm [00:12:08]:

We like to remind people we exist beyond walls and borders. Again, as outside of the box thinkers, we definitely want to support the work in the board of education, where many of us are currently. But we also have partnerships both beyond our local area in terms of outside of our board and with other school board folks, but also beyond Ontario, beyond Canada, so

internationally, and our website and our resources that we continue to try to create, we try to make sure that those are available to people, not just in our school board, but beyond. And we enrich the opportunities for learning and co constructing opportunities to unlearn and to build new schema based on the newer research by continually cross pollinating ideas both locally and internationally. So that's been a huge piece of the community building that's been essential for us. And I don't know if there's a particular focus you want to go into today.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:13:22]:

Well, maybe, Karen, I'll just jump in there. It's funny because I've had some conversations with you before, and I know this is just you. Like, you're just talking and you articulate so beautifully, I think, the "why" of why we need to learn and reflect on neurodiversity, what we don't know, don't understand, and why it's so important. So I'm just wondering, for all of us listening, what are some of those practical, maybe easy to start with, neuroaffirmative practices that you have put into place in your own space? What do we start looking at? Where's this good starting place?

Karen Timm [00:14:04]:

Sure. A real founding idea that I think sometimes can hit people in the face when they recognize it as what it is, is that idea of reframing normal. And just like neurodiversity says, that we all have different minds. To reframe normal is to understand that there really is no such thing as normal. There's no one best brain or one best type of anything, really. Every single one of us belongs and matters, but human beings are continually rated by the biases and preconceived notions of what is more valuable, what's better, what's more acceptable, and in its simplest form, that's ableism. But what people are.

Karen Timm [00:14:53]:

I think what we encourage people to do is to really think that ableism is not just about those who are seen as, or who identify as disabled, which some of us do, and some of us don't identify that way. In order to be really fully anti oppressive, we have to recognize that ableism is occurring across all layers of identity. Because we're rating people based on what is seen as better, what is seen as the best way to communicate, the best words to use, the best ways to dress, the best way to perform in x, y or z tasks. And that underlying idea really informs a lot of what we do and what we try to help people. We're all doing it. So it's not like we're the experts. Believe you. Believe you me.

Karen Timm [00:15:43]:

But it's really that underlying idea. Right. Reframing normal, one of the sort of tangible things. Well, there's a lot of tangible things. And like I said on our website, we do have a number of resources we continue to try and develop, or we will vet and point people in the right direction if they check out our website. But shifting and normalising language that honours neurodivergent realities is really important. And that means seeking out the resources that are vetted by those who have the pulse of the community. So if you're wanting to learn about autistic realities, it's really important to think about what books are you reading, whose story are you telling? Who are the authors of the books? And are we telling the story from the perspective of the person

who's autistic? Or are we looking at, you know, this is about my brother, this is about my child, this is about my friend.

Karen Timm [00:16:45]:

And what tropes are being perpetuated, right. This is very common. These are very similar questions to what we think about when we talk about any books in a critically conscious community, when we're trying to question, is this the right book or is it doing more harm than good? So the key is to sort of vet your existing literature and resources that are being used and question not just picture books or novels, but question what are the posters that are up in your community? Or what are the resources you're providing in your community? And what sorts of ideas and representation are you sharing out? Where are our students and also educators and others who work in education as well as community members? What are we seeing on the walls in terms of that idea of what it is to be neurodivergent, what it is to be autistic or an ADHD or someone who's dyspraxic, dyslexic or otherwise neurodivergent? Because too often, even like I said, our best practices start by seeing a deficit that is supposed to be supported. And really, it's not about treatment. It's not about fixing things. It's about shifting a level of understanding in our culture building in our school, in our safe schools thinking, in our wellness thinking. How do we determine success? How do we ensure accessibility and when we shift our thinking and when we afford opportunities that are informed by those authentic voices who are neurodivergent and the current research, et cetera, then we're going to see that the authentic representation is helping to shift thinking. A tangible example that has been really well received in a number of schools.

Karen Timm [00:18:58]:

And it's great because we are seeing a real difference. We used to have posters on the walls.

**Karen Timm:**

This is a real tangible example. It's a simple one, but it's tangible that people can hopefully resonate with. It used to be this whole notion of quiet hands and quiet feet, and we still see those on the walls. And it's not because people are trying to harm people. However, if you are a neurodivergent person, many of us do what's called stimming. All humans stim.

Karen Timm [00:19:27]:

It's really just a self regulatory way of moving. For some of us, it's internal. For some of it's something you can see physically. Some common ones might be rocking, some common ones might be needing to walk around, some other ones might be twirling a ring, or some people will fidget with an earring. That's all stimming. There's lots of ways people do that. Well, when we say to our kids with a poster on the wall, hands and feet still, what's the message saying? If that's the right way to be, if that's what a quiet listener is, or if that's what a good listener looks like, sounds like, then what are we saying to that child or that adult who needs to move during a job interview? Or who needs to walk around while they're thinking and processing information? Or who needs to maybe take a break and come back because they need to just go and stim dance for a minute or something to just sort of decompress. There are a whole lot of messages that are implied in that one simple poster, right?

Karen Timm [00:20:41]:

I think where the gap exists is that the understanding of the need for people to regulate themselves in very different ways is still not understood. And that assumption that sitting quietly is the right way to exist in an educational setting, that whole thing is just wrong. It's outdated, it was never correct, and it's not very responsive at all to many of our learners. And that includes adults, right? So that's where I think people think that by teaching things like social skills, by teaching our students to sit still or to look and sound and act like the kids that are not neurodivergent, they think that that's helping many of us who are neurodivergent. It's actually not. What it often does is it causes kids who could be authentically embracing their own identities, who could be learning the authentic ways that they work, that their minds operate, that they self regulatory, their coping mechanisms for self regulating. These are the things that they should be able to do without having to change. And in some cases, we'll call it masking. For those of us who are autistic, masking is a response that we do both subconsciously and sometimes consciously, because we're trying to fit in. We're trying to survive, in a community, in a society, in a setting where our way of existing is scary for somebody. Somebody else. We're putting everyone else's needs ahead of our own.

So, if it was more natural for me to be moving during a particular setting—let's say a staff meeting, let's say a job interview, one of my favourite ones—just imagine how you get perceived differently—as broken—really, because people do not understand.

And I don't blame the people who see it that way because that's how they've been taught. We've been raised, we've been educated to be educators based on outdated information, based on outdated research and based on, unfortunately, data and research that was, not only like I said, outdated, but based on very small subsets of the population which did not racialized folks, which not include, in many cases, girls and women, and so that has meant that many of our things like diagnostic criteria are not even accurate. So a lot of people are missed out in terms of who's understood to be neurodivergent. You can see how I could go on and on about this?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:23:41]:

Thanks, Karen. Yeah, you've given us so much there to think about, and I really like how you've both given us a prompt to consider interrogating our own mindsets and to be looking at the culture that we're creating through our words and otherwise. And I also really like how you gave some really concrete examples of where principals and teachers can start, right, by looking at resources, literature that they're using, posters, examples, stories that they're telling. And I really appreciate how you've given us those different levels to think. If there was one kind of key message that you would like our listeners to go away with, what would that be?

Karen Timm [00:24:26]:

It's hard to pick one, but I think here's one that may feel a little bit scary for people, and that's okay. I'm good with that. Because, again, I'm an outside of the box thinker, and I think that we

have to challenge our thinking, right? I mentioned before that policies, procedures, all of those things, they can't possibly be current with the up to date research. They can't. It's almost impossible for it because things are changing so quickly. And thankfully, there are so many researchers out there now that are building that new research base, many of whom are neurodivergent. And so I think for educators and school leaders, it's really important that you recognize that you do not need to wait for explicit policy changes to be shifting your thinking, to be challenging your own thinking and challenging as you co construct what does your school community look like? As you're thinking about your school improvement plan, as you're thinking about how do we build community and help create safe and inclusive and accessible spaces, you can be thinking about what does neuroaffirmative practice look like in your school, in this classroom, in this division or grade on that school trip, in this resource? We don't have to wait for those policy changes. I'm not saying go against policy, not at all.

Karen Timm [00:25:57]:

What I'm saying is that we operate in a system, both in an educational, like in a school board, but also within systems in society, and they're based on human rights. Right. Many of us have been part of, passionately part of the creation of human rights policies in a variety of school boards all across the province and beyond. So within that context, we can be all thinking about: I wonder, is this question, is this resource aligned with the human rights of my neurodivergent students, of my neurodivergent employees? And when it comes to some of those tangible things I was mentioning, whether it's resources or what does it look like to ensure a neuroaffirmative staff meeting or a neuroaffirmative co-curricular activity or learning opportunity, you can be thinking about that context, the human rights context, and there's a whole lot of ways that that can happen. Obviously, we can't get into the nitty gritty of that. But the other piece to consider is that we also live in a country that many years ago ratified what's called the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And within that, there are stipulations about what we have a responsibility to do.

Karen Timm [00:27:25]:

And Canada has said, we are going to do this. We are going to ensure that there's access to reliable forms of communication for any folks. We're going to make sure that disabled persons organisations include the majority of people on their executive who identify as the group that they're representing. Right? In terms of authentic and lived voices. We want to make sure, and we've committed to this as a country, not just as educators, but as citizens, as a government, that what we do allows for autonomy. It ensures that there's voice, that there's proper representation, and that we're treated equitably and have opportunities that don't diminish our perspectives, that value our voices. So there's a whole lot of really good reasoning already that exists.

Karen Timm [00:28:23]:

We don't have to wait for a specific policy that says, you must teach about neuroaffirmative practice. There's people out there that are doing great work in schools. Many of our members are starting to feel more comfortable connecting with their administrative leads because maybe they have connected with partners who are also neurodivergent in their own schools or outside



of their schools. And as we build the community, people are starting to feel safer, and administrators in our board, anyway, I'm seeing, and I know in other boards as well, our administrators are seeing the impact of connecting neurodivergent educators and students and giving voice to those who are neurodivergent and recognizing the need for neuroaffirmative practice because having just gone through and continued to see the impact on our schools and society of things like the pandemic, that global trauma impacted many people in many different ways. In our schools, our neurodivergent folks, they're almost like an indicator of how we're doing as a system. And as we see more and more people, not just students, but adults in our systems as well, feeling very challenged by the current state in our schools, we're seeing that manifest in what are being seen as behaviours. They're not behaviours.

Karen Timm [00:29:52]:

They're our bodies and our minds that are responding to challenges that may be related to how we're experiencing those bigger pieces. Right?

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:30:05]:

Well, thank you again, Karen. You've given us, certainly, I think, more than a key message, because this conversation, as you said, could go on, and hopefully they will, though, within our own spaces and spheres of influence, because it is so important, especially as we think about who's sitting in front of us.

Karen Timm [00:30:23]:

Absolutely every conversation matters.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:30:28]:

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 [00:30:42]:

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