

EP 13 - Equity and Mental Health: Strategies for Navigating Challenges

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:14]:

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

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

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:28]:

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 [00:00:46]:

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. Hi everyone. We're here again for another conversation to highlight leadership excellence across the province. Today we are joined by Anjali Bajaj, a vice principal with TDSB. Welcome.

Anjali Bajaj [00:01:26]:

Thank you.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:27]:

Hi Susie, good to be with you again. We're really excited about today's conversation, of course. Looking forward to connecting with Anjali. Welcome, Anjali, and thanks for being here. Before we dig into your area of passion, can you just maybe take a couple of minutes and explain a little bit about your leadership journey and what brought you to this point?

Anjali Bajaj [00:01:50]:

Sure. So I have been a secondary vice principal for nine years now, which I can't believe, but admittedly I came into the role quite early in my career and have since become a mother to two rambunctious little boys. And I've had the pleasure to complete all nine years of my tenure in the

communities I was born and raised in, which is really quite a unique privilege, especially as a child of immigrants and now serving the very newcomer communities that my family once identified as. So I spent the first few years as a vice principal really adjusting to the role while seeking a balance between new motherhood and responsibilities to my community, which I strive for daily. And I discovered this passion kind of working at the intersection of mental health and equity throughout the spring of 2020 while we were all in lockdown trying to support our families and the well being of our communities. And I had a one and a half year old and a three and a half year old at the time. And all of this was against the backdrop of George Floyd's murder and listening daily to the news of how our communities were being disproportionately impacted by COVID, which I was seeing in a very real sense at the school level. And so it was kind of in that moment and in the months and years that followed that I truly undertook my own wellness journey and was leaning into questions about the state of the world, unpacking my own upbringing, and connecting what all of that meant for my practice as an educator, not only supporting students and families, but also supporting fellow staff and colleagues.

Anjali Bajaj [00:03:36]:

And people were really struggling at the time. I think it's fair to say those conditions persist. The Toronto School Administrators Association put out a paper about a year ago outlining a myriad of concerns, including the increasing prevalence of well being, concerns for administration, and increasing violence being directed at school administrators for their efforts with regards to equity, diversity and inclusion work and human rights work, right? And in the 2022-2023, People for Education's annual school survey also reiterated many of those concerns. Right? Specifically noting the decline in youth mental health indicators as well as staff indicators. And we really continue to see those implications of the pandemic play out today. And I think our current context with skyrocketing demands and we're really required right now to navigate highly complex and nuanced and sensitive issues with an increased level of cultural fluency and mental flexibility on our end. And I think all of this is compounded by the fact that many of us came through faculties of education programs or qualification programs, during a time when mental health and equity and cultural responsiveness were not necessarily well integrated.

Anjali Bajaj [00:04:57]:

So that's how I come here today.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:05:01]:

A lot of what you just said really resonates and I know it's a very challenging time and there's a lot we could say about equity and mental health. So Anjali, keeping in mind the short time we have together, where do you want the conversation to go or focus on today?

Anjali Bajaj [00:05:16]:

With the expectation right now that we grow our competencies around defending human rights and broadening our cultural literacies, while deepening our knowledge and practice in regards to anti-oppression and anti-racist education. There's this goal to translate this, to transformative school leadership, right? And then that is a moral imperative that's really important. But I believe our current conditions are not well equipped to necessarily support the concerns that arise with

regard to our own mental health and well being as we strive towards those goals. And I think there's often this invisible cost to our mental health and well-being that comes with leading for equity, especially in our current conditions. So I really welcome the opportunity today to just scratch the surface of a few of the tensions we face in doing this work and share some practical strategies that we can embed in our practice to make this work more sustainable for ourselves so that we don't withdraw from it. We've heard the saying, "you need to name it to tame it", and I really believe we don't talk about this more if we don't develop shared language or address this elephant in the room, then we won't be able to move the needle forward.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:34]:

So thanks. Angelie, you mentioned some tensions that you're navigating as you're doing this work, so maybe you could talk to us a little bit about some of those tensions and some of the strategies that you're using to address or deal with some of those tensions in your work.

Anjali Bajaj [00:06:51]:

Thanks, Lawrence. I really appreciate that. You know, I'm going to outline a couple and they really just scratch the surface. There are many, and equity is a broad umbrella, but I'm going to talk about a couple that are things I've noticed. So a common goal that we see often and a worthy and important thing to strive for as we work towards more inclusive places and schools has always been including a focus on recruiting people into positions to increase representation. Right? And this happens at every level. We want teachers who can represent the student communities in front of them. We want district leaders, perhaps who have been historically excluded to bring their expertise and experience to those levels.

Anjali Bajaj [00:07:41]:

And there's really a strong focus to recruit folks with lived experience into specific lead positions. Or even informally, teams might have someone who enjoys engaging with EDI initiatives. And so let me be clear before I continue, representation is a good thing. It's really important. However, it can sometimes be practised on the surface level, and it doesn't always necessarily happen with intention and care being centred as folks are brought into these spaces. So I feel like there's another side of the representation coin and we've seen a few things happen, right? At times, these folks now become the spokesperson for every topic, kind of equity related, and all things might now be funnelled to them, or they are now considered the resident expert. And the sheer load alone of addressing situation after situation or responding and consulting on contact can be really overwhelming, especially with the frequency and urgency of things that come their way and that can take a real significant toll on one's mental health. Combine that with the fact that our stress response can get activated due to the frequency and urgency of things coming to us, or the volume of harmful incidents that are crossing our path in a day, and our own stress response gets activated, right? Our decision making faculties go down.

Anjali Bajaj [00:09:16]:

We can become compassion-fatigued, or resentful or angry or irritable, which is not a recipe for success. And sometimes just the mere existence of such roles is used by others to absolve them from engaging with the grittiness and nuance that's required to work through a particular

situation. I've heard people say, oh, I'm not the equity person. Make sure to go consult with so and so. Right? Or, oh, make sure you get so and so to sign off on this. And sometimes I think it's while our days are busy, sometimes I think that happens as a way to almost pass the buck. Right. And it can be dangerous.

Anjali Bajaj [00:10:01]:

And it also places the burden of labour on folks who, as we've mentioned, are already possibly brought into these positions because we are trying to increase representation. So that is really concerning to me. However, I really think there are strategies and things we can put in place to try and combat that or to try and support people as they take on these roles.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:10:32]:

Thanks, Anjali. So maybe at this point, maybe you could share what are some of those practical strategies? And I see this kind of from two lenses, both from protecting the mental health of racialized leaders, but at the same time, you know, meeting that leadership responsibility to build capacity and mentor others.

Anjali Bajaj [00:10:51]:

Right. So we need to do something because the work is too important to turn away from. And I think it's really, really important that we get intentional about what that circle of support looks like around ourselves and our teams. One of the simple strategies, but really impactful and valuable ones: I personally had a mentor when I first came into the role who would make me specifically call everyone I knew to make connections to run my game plan by them, even if I knew my next steps to really reach out in the board or, you know, between schools or even within the school to help build my connection. And I think that that act alone really helped me find my people, and it remains a really valuable tool in my wellness plan today and something that I pass on to other aspiring leaders. And so the second piece of that, though, is being really intentional about establishing about who you bring into that circle of care around you. Right? So we don't only want to have cheerleaders in our corner or, you know, comrades in commiserie, but we also want to make sure we're including critical friends that you have folks around you that you can trust, who you can go to to interrupt your thinking or pause your thinking, people who will kind of hold you to account.

Anjali Bajaj [00:12:23]:

So accountability partners, as well as having someone who's cheering you on from a wellness perspective, right? Who's coaching you to remind you to focus on your wellness. And so I think that is really important, but it also means being intentional for ourselves and giving ourselves permission to seek other supports as well, whether it be therapeutic services like regular RMTs, therapy or counselling, or actually taking a calendar and scheduling the break in. You know, we know what the cycle of a school year is, and so thinking ahead for when we might need an intentional break that we plan for can be a really valuable practice. And I know as OPC members, we also have free access to things like CBT-based virtual therapies through Starling Minds. And over the past couple of years, we've also seen affinity groups pop up. And I know OPC hosts many affinity groups as well, online, where you get to connect with educators who

identify with a particular demographic, and you get to meet and kind of unpack things together. So that's one strategy, I think, another practice that we need to embrace before we take on these roles and something that we can contribute as a collective, as a community of educators, is to start asking better questions throughout the recruitment process.

Anjali Bajaj [00:14:02]:

Before we take on a position, there are things we can ask to help us determine if we're walking into a supportive environment. So questions like, what does anti oppressive leadership look like to you? Or how many people are supporting this department? Or how are incidences of employee discrimination handled here? What sort of supports are available, or what sort of training is available, and what's in place if a mistake is made. How does this team navigate difficult or challenging moments? That's a little bit more of a vulnerable practice to do because it would really take all of us as a collective, doing this regularly and normalising this. But I think if we ask these questions upfront, we are contributing to that culture where we're expecting, whether it's organisations or leadership or senior leadership or our boards, to answer these. It's a way of us communicating our boundaries and making explicit our expectations. So I think the more we ask for these, the more normalised it gets and the less it can be ignored. And right now, I've never seen more people being offered jobs who aren't necessarily jumping to take them. Educators are becoming much more selective in the roles that they take on, and I think a big part of it is them being very discerning as to what environment they want to be a part of.

Anjali Bajaj [00:15:43]:

Another piece of that is really recognizing our own contribution to the culture. Education as a field has really, for many, many years, normalised this kind of paradigm of doing whatever it takes and going above and beyond. And so there's this culture in schools that we expect that of everyone. And so I think it also requires us to model as leaders self care much more seriously. And I know personally when I've worked with leaders who remind me it's okay to prioritise your family, or it's okay to schedule that rest day. I'm much more likely to engage with that and set that up for myself than when I'm working with leaders who I can see are putting in 150%, but also burning out in the process. We permit what we promote, and that isn't just related to student behaviour; it's deeply connected to how we work in buildings and what we model for staff and students.

Anjali Bajaj [00:16:57]:

And that's going to really contribute to a better culture of care. I also think there are other realities that we deal with. So on top of being representatives, part of this work also requires us to uphold the Ontario Human Rights code and maintain environments free from discrimination, bias, hate, and racism. But simultaneously, as I mentioned earlier, we can often be on the receiving end of harmful interactions for our efforts. And as administrators, we don't often get a choice about walking into potentially harmful situations. So whether that be overhearing disturbing statements from members of our school communities, to being a direct party to insults or threats, or just having, you know, the onslaught of responding to deeply disturbing acts. And so these things present themselves, sometimes rapidly and with such frequency that by the end of the day, you have a pile of things that haven't been processed. And, you know, you combine

that with the fact that we come to this work with different positionalities. You know, Doctor Ken Hardy talks about the assaulted sense of self and the fact that we can experience these and they build up.

Anjali Bajaj [00:18:23]:

You start to experience this cumulative effect. But on top of that, we are also required to now monitor our own voices, and we are constantly calibrating and measuring our own response to this type of environment, on top of being the person who has to respond. So we're now having to be hyper-vigilant to our own reactions, because those too can then be used or weaponized against us. And so that is a mouthful, because it is. It's overwhelming on the ground level when you're in a building every day. And so on top of creating those intentional circles of care that we spoke about earlier and putting that circle in place, I think it's very, very crucial to our well being to take time to do some really deep inner work, examining our own values, identifying our own triggers, and creating boundaries and scripts for us to address them. This also does not just apply to educators who, you know, might identify as a historically marginalised or excluded population. This is necessary for all educators, because all of us, in some way, need to take time to understand how we might even contribute to harm in the.

Anjali Bajaj [00:19:51]:

In the workplace. And so if I'm clear on where I hold my expertise, where I don't. If I'm clear on what topics or situations I'm uncomfortable about and which topics I'm not. If I'm clear on the signs, even in my body, of when I'm reaching capacity and when I have capacity, then I can map out ahead of time how I might respond to a difficult moment, right? And I can map out what language I'm going to use ahead of time so that in those moments when we are moving at the speed of light, it becomes habit and we have that language at the ready. Right? So something that I have kind of come to through my own learning, but also seen since my own experience was really hearing about Doctor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz. She is a professor out of Columbia University Teachers College. She speaks about the archaeology of self, you know, which is a process of really digging deep and peeling back the layers of our life experiences as it relates to justice, bias and the stereotypes we hold to uncover our triggers, our assumptions, and how it impacts our work as educators. And I think it's really incumbent upon us as school leaders to create spaces where we do this work, not only for ourselves, but with other educators. A tool that I've used to do this in a group setting to begin a conversation like that in a group setting, because it is a very vulnerable type of conversation to have, is actually been using the school mental Health Ontario Cultural Humility Tool. So it's just a self assessment survey.

Anjali Bajaj [00:21:45]:

It's really quick, but it has some really interesting questions for educators to reflect on, including, you know, I understand my own culture, or I am aware of my areas of discomfort, or my favourite, I can repair relationships. I don't know that we talk about making mistakes and avoiding mistakes, but do we talk about what repair looks like? And so I think that's a great place either as an individual or if you're working with a group of staff to start that conversation with your staff.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:22:17]:

Well, thanks, Anjali. We really appreciate you sharing such a rich set of strategies and I would say provocations for all educators to kind of do that deep reflection on how they are, you know, their own commitments and their own learning around equity work and the kinds of cultures and environments that they are providing to support the well being of their staff and students. So we really appreciate you sharing your expertise and your experience with us today, and we're looking forward to the next conversation.

Anjali Bajaj [00:22:50]:

Thank you. It was lovely being here.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:22:56]:

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 family colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:23:08]:

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.