

EP 15 - Special Education 6-week Co-learning and Instructional Cycle

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 [00:00:23]:

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.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:23]:

Thanks, Susie. Glad to be back with you having another great conversation. Welcome to Dinusha and Samantha. We're really delighted to welcome you here today and we're really looking forward to hearing about some of the work that you've been doing. Before we dive into that, maybe let's take a minute or two to introduce yourselves and maybe share a little bit about your leadership journey and what brings you to this point. So maybe we can start with Samantha.

Samantha Stephen [00:01:47]:

Okay, thanks for the introduction and you know what? Dhanusha and I are looking forward to being part of this session today. I just wanted to let you know that before we start, I'm going to introduce myself, but I also just wanted to send a quick shout out to Francine Tulloch-Harvey, who was going to be the third person participating in this session with us for this episode. Unfortunately, she had a conflicting priority and had to send her regrets, but we wanted to acknowledge her contributions for helping to co create the material for this dialogue. My name is

Samantha and I've been an administrator for a number of years in Peel. Started my journey around 2019 and I've actually worked with Dinusha for an extensive period of time. Prior to that, I was a teacher at Royal Orchard and I think both of us had the same journey experience initially where we were highly supported by Kervin White, who's now a superintendent with the Peel District School Board. We were really strong advocates for children, always involved in new initiatives and in supporting the goals of the Board.

Samantha Stephen [00:02:49]:

And I think Kervin and a number of other administrators that we both had along our teaching journey have seen that in us. And this was not necessarily where we saw ourselves as educators. We really wanted to stay on the ground working with children, but we got a push, more of a kick into this profession. And we decided that somebody was valuing and seeing our lens and understanding how it could be useful in a different capacity. And that kind of was the catalyst for my journey into the VP role. And then I was fortunate enough to work with and be taken under by Patrika —Superintendent Patrika Daws, who's now retired, who saw my capacity as a VP. And again, another kick through the door landed me into the principal's role, which I have to say I've really enjoyed the journey and has really allowed me to grow as a person and as a professional.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:03:46]:

Yeah. And just sort of building on what Samantha sort of started speaking about. I've been with the Peel District School Board for about 15 years and had a variety of different teaching roles before I became. Became an administrator. I'm really passionate about the middle years and I spent a lot of my time in the grades six, seven and eight grade levels. I also became a guidance counsellor, was a contact teacher, ISSP.—just different, different roles that sort of led us to this portion of our careers in administration. As Samantha mentioned, we were definitely very lucky to be supported by some really great leaders in Peel.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:04:31]:

Kervin White was definitely someone that encouraged us to pursue this role even when we really didn't think that it was cut out for us. And once I became a vice principal, which happened four years ago now, through the pandemic, is actually when I started in 2020. Yeah, there's just been a lot of growth. And I also was lucky enough to work with Patrika Daws, who didn't take no for an answer and pushed us into the principal role again. And, yeah, just very privileged, I think, along our experiences as educators to have people that saw and valued our leadership and the things that we were bringing to our schools, even when we didn't recognize it necessarily ourselves.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:05:21]:

Okay, well, thank you both. Certainly a lot of your stories resonate with me. We always need, I think, the support along our journey. It's always very helpful. And I also appreciate the shout out to Francine, and certainly we're going to miss her in this conversation. So we know that you will be sharing about a tool that has been developed to support student learning. I certainly know

how passionate you are about the impact that this tool or process has been, and so I'm just going to turn it back over to both of you to give us a summary of how it all works.

Samantha Stephen [00:05:52]:

So I think one of the things, as we transition to the role, we all share a lot of the same kind of thinking and constructs in that we are really change makers. We are looking for opportunities within the board to execute the highest level of problem solving, to assess gaps and look at specific needs. And I think the key to the work that we do is, you know, I ground it in community. So I'm always speaking about how do we leverage the capacity of all members in our board, the cultural wealth, the human capacity, to really dig into all the skill sets that many people in our board can offer from all divisions and all levels of the organisation, to co-construct an environment that will lend itself to the highest level of outcome for students. So in this capacity, one of the things we did is a number of us were coming into the role as new administrators and were finding that we were constantly trying to network with each other, reaching out to kind of figure out what our next steps were as far as operationalizing buildings and putting in some ground processes. And we were always on WhatsApp or another social media platform or just picking up the phone saying, what are you experiencing? And do you have this? And how could I enhance this? Or what do I need to do in this area? And those questions became so frequent between a number of us that I reached out to a couple of colleagues, actually a lot of colleagues, and I just asked people if they wanted to sit down at some point when we could find some time and space and co create some tools that would help us operationalize anti-racism and anti oppressive practices and tools and ways of thinking and being that would be fundamental to shifting our buildings. And of course, a lot of our work is coming out of the gaps and the directors that were part of the ministry review of the Peel District School Board and in light of the pervasiveness of anti black racism in Peel. So we really had that as a pillar for the foundation of what was then formed and created, which was the transformative administrative network, which was a collaboration of educators and colleagues, administrative colleagues, who came together over the summer of 2022 to co construct site specific tools using a high level of discourse and criticality to really operationalize anti racism in all aspects of our site driven processes and procedures.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:08:29]:

Samantha's kind of notorious for just picking up the phone and calling and creating little projects for us. That's something that we often laugh and joke about. But that particular summer, just to kind of set the stage, we were all brand new administrators. We're all, within our first couple years, it was coming out of COVID And at that point, to be very honest, we were exhausted. We really wanted that summer to kind of relax and recharge. But as she started calling all of us up, we sort of realised that we weren't alone in feeling in this way, right? We weren't alone in realising that we needed tools that could take up everything that we know around equity and anti racism and tie it into those operations that happen every single day in our building. So we set the time out. You know, that summer there was a large group of us, and we went through and created a whole bunch of different tools, everything from looking at our budgets, looking at excursions, looking at report cards, looking at progressive discipline, restorative justice.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:09:39]:

In total, we actually created almost 20 different tools that we initially created in subgroups, but came back to the whole team and to really critically review out and deepen the conceptualization embedded in each one of those tools. And one of the key tools that we're going to be sharing today is the six week co learning and instructional tool.

Samantha Stephen [00:10:04]:

So this tool was actually the creation of three of the members who are part of what we call the transformative Administrators Network. And that network was responsible for co creating and envisioning this transformative administrators toolkit, which is a resource of toolkits and resources, materials and operational processes that administrators can use to really ground and decenter hierarchy, but really ground the buildings through a commonality, so that all stakeholders within this site are very aware of the way that we transparently look to transform spaces and remove any cultural practice that may be harmful or disadvantaging to any of the student populations in our building. And a number of people worked on that initial six week tool that made it really informative.: myself, I worked with Liz Lovell, Andrea Carnegie and Nadine Fisher. And although we were part of the subgroup that focused on creating this six week tool, what we did in the larger group of our tat network was that we asked people to come back for each of the tools that were developed to really look at, bring in outside perspectives and criticality, to deconstruct the tools, to deepen the effectiveness. So when we look at the tool that we created, the fundamental reason for its creation was to take away what we tend to see in special education as the "I know, I think" assumptions about students. So the notion that we problematize students as being individuals who come with these nuances of challenges, and somehow, as educators were there to fix children. And we really wanted to move around pathologizing children, especially Black and Indigenous children, and those most marginalised within our educational system.

Samantha Stephen [00:11:54]:

And what this tool did is it provided a six week process that removed the hierarchies and the teacher as the knower and information sharer of a child and leveraged the child and the family as being highly instrumental in helping to co-construct learning goals and learning strategies that would help us understand the child's learning portrait. So we really took away the focus from the child in creating this tool, and we created a template where the teacher was the focus and we were looking primarily at problematizing practice, not the individual teacher, but their practice, and looking at how we could elevate practices or shift practices with the intention of making them more comparable and compatible with a child's learning potential and learning portrait. So the tool itself and the construct of the tool allows us to provide the opportunity to share anecdotal notes and family correspondence and involvement with administrator and support team members to really understand and deepen our understanding of the child's learning portrait. Children cannot be brought through this process without evidence base, so we don't have conversations where we talk about a teacher's assumptions or perceptions of a child. Anytime a child is having a challenge with learning and a teacher is having a challenge with programming, that teacher comes to the table, utilizes this tool to consolidate and provide an evidence-based history and anecdotal around what they've done to date and around what their

observations are for themselves and for the child. So what are they learning about the child as they're watching? Whether or not their practice and their instruction has been an effective tool for the child and their learning curve. We also ask the team to monitor the child over a given period of time so that we're not making pre assumptions about children's learning patterns, because sometimes kids need some time to acclimatize to a new classroom setting or to new situations that are embedded or unfolding in the classroom.

Samantha Stephen [00:14:05]:

And then I'll get Dinusha to speak to what happens at the first week between week one and three when we action this tool in our school sites.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:14:14]:

Yeah. So then we go into week one to three, and really what we're doing during that process is you're sitting down with the family, with the student, with the educator, and any other educators that might be important to have at that table. Right. That could be planning time, teachers, it could be your special education team. There could be any sort of other allies that the student might have that might be relevant to have as a voice at the table. And at that point, you're creating some goals, of course, really centering the family and the student in the creation of those goals. And you're going through the first part of that cycle. So you're looking at the reasoning for the cycle, you're going through the goals they're co created, they're shared back with the family to ensure that the family is really an important and ongoing part of that learning process.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:15:12]:

At that point, you know, they can ask questions, you know, look at any action tasks that they might want to help support at home. And throughout those three weeks, the educator's continuing to collect data around the goals, the successes that the student might see, be seeing in the class, you know, with the new strategies that have been implemented, any other challenges that, you know, might be being experienced, and bringing that back to the table after those three weeks for a mid-cycle review. So based on that, we're, again, we're really centering evidence during these conversations. So when you have that three week kind of meeting, you're looking at evidence that's being brought from, like, you know, work samples, like any anecdotes, whatever you might be bringing, understanding that we're looking at evidence in a triangulated view and looking at what the goals might be for the next three weeks. So are the goals going to be the same? Because, you know, you're seeing some progress. Do they need to be tweaked? Do they need to be changed? How's the family feeling around it? How's the student, of course, feeling around the goals? And at that point, you know, if any adjustments need to be made, you can make those. And we roll into the next two weeks, which is weeks four to six.

Samantha Stephen [00:16:39]:

And a lot of people have asked, so how do you do this and get staff buy in? And I think the key to rolling out this cycle was when we came together as the transformative admin network. There were two teachers at this site who came to see the lens that I was leading with. And they said,

Samantha, at any point, if there's any opportunities to work and learn from you in any other capacities, we would love to take on that opportunity. So I invited them to be part of that summer project, and they really wanted to be able to work with a critically diverse group of people, but also to hone in on what were already their own natural skill sets and be able to further those. And when we came back to school that year, we sat with the ISSP team, a guidance counsellor, and the BEA at the school, and we looked at the tool and I explained the conceptualization and the way that we're leveraging the cultural wealth of our families and the student and the efficacy of all players, not just teachers, in doing this process, and we spent the time as administrators teaching the staff members who were involved in leading this initiative—what it would look like, how to implement it. But we worked in co partnership, and I think the key to any big rollout in moving your staff team from novice to mastery with anything that's going to be developed in your site, is that you have to model your commitment, but you also have to seek their input. So although we created this tool during the summer and it was primarily made by administrators, at each site, that tool was shared with the support team and with other members of the team, and we asked for feedback.

Samantha Stephen [00:18:17]:

Is there anything that we need to add to this tool? Do you see anything that's missing that you think would be instrumental in actioning it at our site? Is there anything specific you want to see as part of the rollout? So we take that feedback really seriously because it really helps us to ground some of the gaps, again, that we might not be seeing, but it makes it doable for people to see this practice as being instrumental and shifting in their space. So in order to leverage that capacity of your in school support team, we provided them with the time, we provided them with resources, we provided them with funding and materials, and then we gave them the opportunity to support the rollout of the tool through professional learning, both at staff meetings and continued at "lunch and learns" in the building, and then on an ongoing basis, as staff needed the help in really navigating this implementation, we made sure we provided that time. And one of the reasons why the tool has been so successful, for example, at the school that I'm at, we had a 59% drop in referrals to our in school support program. And the reason for that is, without doubt, because all of the players involved have been supported on a scaffolded and layered level to really understand the nuances and the parameters of the tool, but also to action the tool in their classroom so people can come to the office and they can say, I'm stuck, Sam. I've tried this tool and this strategy with a child. It's been unsuccessful. And at any point, we make it a priority to grab, you know, some collective voices to meet again and to look at what can we do next. So the teacher is always supported in the role, and that's one key piece that's made this tool extremely successful.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:07]:

Thank you both so much. I mean, I really like how you're describing how you're co creating this process by incorporating the voices of your community, your parents, your students and your staff. I think that's a really powerful approach, and I really like how you've shifted the emphasis from problematizing students to the problematizing of practices and how the emphasis or the focus can be shifted to that. So I really appreciate that. That's really great. Can you talk a little

bit about just what some of the impact is? I know you said that it's been tremendously successful, but what kind of feedback are you getting from parents and students?

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:20:48]:

Yeah, I think that, first of all, once educators realise that we're not spending so much of our time in school meetings. At my school personally, we, our ISRC meetings used to take a full day. Now we're able to because we're getting less referrals. Now all of those staff members that are normally part of those meetings are able to really service students. Right? The students that, you know, are kind of on their caseloads and just from a human resources perspective, that's been amazing for all of us. I don't think that we're alone in our experiences. You know, we always need more time with our speech and language pathologists, with our social workers, with our special education teachers.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:21:35]:

And just the ability to have them be more free to work directly with students and with teachers in itself has been like, you know, really incentive incentivized using these tools. I will also say that we did have to really be cognizant of ensuring that teachers were supported with resources. If we're saying that we need to look at classroom practice and then we're not giving teachers the resources or the tools that they need to be able to incorporate those strategies in their classroom in a way that is effective but also efficient, because we know that teachers are always struggling. There's never enough time in a day, you know, it's not going to be received well. Right. So things like, you know, at the middle school level, like I had to think about purchasing, "Catch Up Your Code", for example, for, you know, doing some tier one reading interventions that could be implemented in the classroom level. So again, you know, I think once teachers realise that, yes, you know, we are looking at problematizing practice, however, we are supporting you with the resources and with the time and with the training to develop that practice, it ended up being extremely well received. Right.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:22:53]:

When you look at the tool itself, you know, in all honesty, it does seem like quite daunting. Right. It is a lot of, like, evidence that we're asking teachers to share. However, it really does pay off in the long run. And the more success that teachers, you know, were having in their classrooms. Like that word just spreads. And it's something that, you know, we've seen at our sites, but we've also seen throughout the system, like we've definitely had, you know, administrative colleagues come and let us know that they're using the six week co learning cycle in their schools as well.

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:23:28]:

And what a difference it's made in their sites. And we've had opportunities to share it as well through PPVPA because we do believe that this is important. It's important to deprivatize our practice. We believe in working in community and, yeah, so we do want to make sure that we share the tools as well. And we've had great feedback from families, from students, from other administrative colleagues, from the system.

Samantha Stephen [00:23:53]:

And just to piggyback on what Dhanush is saying, I think another key element. One of the things that we did when co constructing this tool was the intentionality. And, you know, you have to see the tool and you have to understand the conceptualization to get the way that we think. But everything that we did in this, in our toolkit, our transformative admin toolkit, all the pieces are really intertwined. So, for example, this six week co-learning and instructional cycle is absolutely essential in helping to develop the tools, resources, understandings, anecdotes and evidence required to build effective report cards. Because once you're monitoring a child's progress to your instructional practice, what you end up getting is a wealth of documentation to support the writing of a report card. And we've received great feedback from families through our school council conversations and through conversations with individual families around their recognition of the fact that they've seen the report card writing change to really affirm the child's learning and exactly and explicitly what they were learning and how they were learning it. And a lot of that is coming from the use of the co-working tool. The other thing we were able to do with this tool that's been really effective is the tool really allowed teachers to isolate the area where the child was not necessarily responding to the classroom or their instruction.

Samantha Stephen [00:25:21]:

So was it an academic need? Was it a social-emotional need? Was it a self-regulation and a learning need? And we were able to keep data on all of those referrals to this tool and monitor where the highest area of need was in our building. And again, for us at the school that I work at, that a lot of our needs were two things. They were social, emotional, and they were academic, specifically reading related. So that consolidation of data that's coming out of the tool was a driving force in my being able to look at what do we need to action and focus on as a priority for year two in my role as a principal and bringing the team together to look at our reading data and our referrals to see what the gaps were. And just like the Dinusha, we put in a tiered approach to making sure we could target reading at the grade one to eight level using Heggerty, UFLI, Catch Up The Code as our tier one two supports, and in our current tier three supports, we're going deeper with reading programs like Empower and Reading Mastery and SRA. And then we've implemented a high level of accountability for classroom teachers around utilising Lexia and that resource to support students from a home school partnership. And then we have even things like 100 Easy Lessons, I Love Reading that are family friendly, that can be supported as reading initiatives at home. So when we look at this tool, it really is shaping the way in which we use data and data driven evidence as a process to uphold our legal and moral responsibilities and accountabilities to teaching and to creating a learning environment where students can be successful.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:27:11]:

So I really wish we had more time to continue this conversation with you. Just even from all the listening and the sharing that you've done, for me, I just see this, the tools you've created, I know you've gone specific into this one. You are providing a bridge between theory and practice and giving, I think, staff a tangible tool to do that. So if you could give a message, each of you to our listeners, of one thing to take away in 30 seconds each, what would that be?

Dinusha Gunasingham [00:27:44]:

I think that it would really be around the piece of looking at what the data is telling you and looking at how you can really pull on the cultural wealth and human capacity both in and outside your building. Right? Like looking for those diverse voices, looking for those different lived experiences, being vulnerable and humble enough to say that you might not know the answer, but you want to work with people who might, and finding ways to bring all of that to the table to really ensure that we're doing our roles as administrators in a way that really honours the obligations that we have legally, morally, to our students and the community, the communities that we have the privilege of serving.

Samantha Stephen [00:28:38]:

Hey, and Samantha, you know, I spoke a little earlier to Dinusha about the misconception of what a seasoned teacher or a seasoned administrator is. And I really like to challenge that notion that being a seasoned administrator is associated with your years of practice and the permanence of your role and really want people who are entering the role all over the province, who are coming in at a point in time where, you know, the transition to this role is really demanding. We're coming out of COVID There's a new climate around equity and anti-racism that is really forcing us to change and grow and to shift for the betterment of our communities. That season is not about the time you spend in a role, but it's what you do with the time that you're in that role. Developing effective leadership with a focus of purpose, intention and transformation is what seasoned is. It's taking your title and the possibilities that you have as you shape a learning space to be instrumental in providing opportunities for all key players to be co learners, co authors, and co participants in shaping the lives of the children that we serve.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:29:58]:

Again, like Susie, I wish we had some more time to continue this conversation, but I think you've given us lots to think about. Thank you so much, both of you, Samantha and Dinusha, for sharing your experiences and expertise with us. You've clearly developed some really powerful tools here, and it's quite obvious how passionate you are and how deep you've gone with the implementation and how you've invited your colleagues and others into these new processes that you've created here. I'm sure that your efforts are really creating a transformative impact in your schools and beyond. So thank you so much for being here today

Samantha Stephen [00:30:35]:

And thank you for having us. And if I could just close, Lawrence, with just recognizing the members of the TAT team, would that be okay?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:30:43]:

Go for it.

Samantha Stephen [00:31:33]:

Yeah, I just wanted to take an opportunity to also extend a thank you to the members of the Transformational Administrative Network, the creators of the TAT tools, all of whom could not be with us today to participate in this session. So, Andrea Carnegie, Francine Tulloch-Harvey,

Asma Haque, Antonella Kalaitzis, Lisa Sarbadhikari, Patricia Onderdonk, Liz Lovell, Nadene Fischer, Sarah Dadgar, Andrea Brown, Tony Moscone, and Cheryl Miller. Thank you to the team.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:31:22]:

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 [00:31:35]:

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