

## EP 19 - Project Based Learning and Student Engagement

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. Welcome back everyone. We're here for another episode with another guest and voice from the field. Hi Lawrence, it's great as always to be with you. And today we're joined by Andrea Gill, a vice-principal with Halton District School Board. Welcome, Andrea. Great to have you with us.

Andrea Gill [00:01:16]:

Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here with everyone today.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:19]:

Hi Andrea, really good to be with you again and to have a bit of a conversation before we kind of jump into your area of passion. Maybe we could take a minute or two for you to introduce yourself and just tell us a little bit about your leadership journey. What's kind of brought you to this point?

Andrea Gill [00:01:36]:

Thanks so much, Lawrence. That's a great question and it was something that I think is really important for leaders to reflect on, on an ongoing basis. I've been a vice-principal for the last

several years in the Halton District School board, both at Montclair here in Oakville, and previously at Viola Desmond in Milton. And prior to that, for over a decade I was a teacher in Peel. And I've had the opportunity to actually be part of two new school openings. And one of the things that I took from that was the opportunity to understand and co create a common vision and language. And that was something that has actually transferred into my role as a vice principal, that I've been incredibly grateful to be part of. Schools that have a shared language, a shared idea of what their mission is, and their dedication is to serving students.

Andrea Gill [00:02:28]:

I approach my practice with an early years lens. I do have my ECE, and doing my Master's of Education at the Dr. Eric Jackman Child Study Lab with OISE, gave me a real look at how we can look at the learning environment and how that impacts and informs and supports student learning. And I don't think that's something that is reserved only for the early years. I think that's something that transfers across all grades and all learning environments and having over ten years of experience as a professor at Humber and Sheridan Colleges in the area of early childhood education and behaviour science has also informed that practice. My stance is as a leader, I'm a leader in learning. And so by modeling that I'm a lifelong learner as well. And always looking to innovate and inspire and create learning spaces that are supportive of all students is where I come to the work.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:03:26]:

Thanks, Andrea. So our listeners may not know, but we always do a little pre-meeting with our guests prior to and so we know that you're going to be talking to us today about the importance of fostering student voice. I love that you have the early years lens. I think that is so important to really think about our earliest learners. And we all know some of the studies where kids come in excited and engaged and then it sort of drops off as we carry on. So we'd love to hear from you. How do we bring the best of student inspiration to our work as well as really turn the reins over to students to drive their learning?

Andrea Gill [00:04:02]:

I wanted to start with a quote that I love from Gholdy Muhammad—*Unearthing Joy*. "Joy balances criticality. When we are fighting for justice and building a better world, joy and beauty can enter our lives." So it's that piece of sparking, the innovation, fostering joy and connection in our students and in their learning. And as a leader, a big goal of mine is to foster the humility, the ability to come to the work, to see new ideas, new opportunities for learning and decentering myself as an expert in the room. As an educator, it's our job to facilitate that learning and provide spaces for that learning to take place, but we are certainly co learners in that. So I come to the work looking at the curiosity, the tell me more idea, balancing high expectations, high engagement, but also with high support.

Andrea Gill [00:04:51]:

The perspective that I foster in schools that I lead are around the whole child perspective. And that really does come from the early years of looking at how we can uphold student gifts, curiosities, their profiles, to increase their student agency and their voice and their choice. So

when doing that, I think it's important that we come to this as a whole school and we look at creating responsive learning environments from the creation of what are our guiding thoughts, what are our guiding values, our commitments as leaders and as educators and including students in that through their voice. That's something I've focused on in my practice of having students leaders within the school, whether they're, you know, the traditional leaders who want to sign up for everything but also engaging all students to ensure that they're able to come and give their ideas, whether it be for teams, initiatives, or even what their classroom looks like. What do their environments look like? Having input into that, I think is key. When making decisions. I think it's important, too, to think about why we're making those decisions, why are we making this decision at that time, and how does that uphold the collective commitments we have for students?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:00]:

Thanks, Andrea. So I'm thinking about how you would have incorporated that philosophy into your classroom, as a classroom teacher; how do you think that philosophy is showing up in your work as a vice principal? What kinds of processes or decision making sort of frameworks are you using to kind of ground your work as a vice principal in alignment with those values that you talked about?

Andrea Gill [00:06:25]:

That's great. And I really see that as, you know, what is your leadership philosophy, your dedication to learners, and how do you make that into an actionable piece in your leadership moves? So we use Street Data, actually as our focus. We looked at qualitative and quantitative data when gathering student voice and data to drive our decision making. One of the things that we used was the inclusive design framework. We looked to see an inventory in the school of what we saw around student voice, the learning environment, and what initiatives and teaching strategies we were using for students. And from there, we were actually able to use the lesson study model. That was a huge area for us, both in my current school and in my previous school at Viola Desmond. We looked at how we could provide release time for teachers to co plan and co teach.

Andrea Gill [00:07:16]:

The lesson study model is actually founded around the idea of almost like medical rounds based out of Japan, and it comes with evidence based data to support it. From that, we were able to provide educators with the opportunity to break down those silos, come together, look at how they wanted to design lessons and impacts for students, and then support each other in that. So often we are in a classroom working with students and we don't have that opportunity to come together, and that creates connection, collaboration and trusting relationships within the school. It also moves forward our school improvement plan. So our goals around literacy, well being and math are able to be met through this opportunity as well. We had some really great feedback from that. Another one was around the idea of professional collaboration groups. So we really looked to reimagine our staff meetings and provide opportunities to meet our goals around CRRP practices.

Andrea Gill [00:08:15]:

We did that through our collaboration groups where staff members were actually able to come together through guiding articles and guiding books to look at their practices, look at our inclusive design framework and make suggestions around next steps. And some of that included things like flexible learning spaces, having various cross grade groups in order to foster connection and student leadership, having flexible learning spaces, so podcast areas, having open areas for multiple groups and multiple purposes to learn and engage and connect, and having also project-based learning planning time. So using design and tech rooms and various innovative spaces I think is key. So providing staff with the opportunity for leadership through professional development, through collaboration and really flexing and being creative with that time that we have together has been a huge way and vehicle in which I have been able to leverage our commitments and our goals and our philosophy into action.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:09:23]:

Andrea, I'm kind of reading in between the lines a little bit, given the current state of our schools, and I know how busy the plates of administrators are, but it sounds like you're doing some really deep work around school improvement, even though, you know, we can often hear there's no time for school improvement. So I'm wondering if you could share a little more about how you keep the conversation at the forefront with staff in creative ways, like what are you doing that allows you to keep this ball rolling?

Andrea Gill [00:09:51]:

One of the things that I love the most about the role is that collaborative problem solving, the creativity and the innovation, and looking at those challenges around time and space and all of that and many different things that are happening in our buildings all at once, that is an opportunity to leverage our school improvement plan. So I see that as actually a partnership between the two. You know, the daily operational pieces of that's where we can find the opportunity to connect and collaborate and bring everyone together. So feedback from staff around what they need in order to create their goals and achieve and maintain them is important. That's one area— looking for opportunities that we have. So whether it's through our professional development days, through our staff meetings, our grade team meetings, but I also think providing the opportunity for release time and opportunities for leadership and planning has been really key. One example specifically that I'd like to share with you is around our community rebuilding project that we have right now happening. Staff wanted to provide our intermediate students with the opportunity to become leaders and have their voices heard within the school around what they want their school environment to be.

Andrea Gill [00:11:05]:

And so we were able to apply for the, I-Think, community rebuilding partnership. And through that, we've had the opportunity to provide staff with release time for professional development around that and how we leverage that and how we make that into an actionable item in our school. But we've also had the opportunity for students to be involved to connect with other schools, connect with each other across grades, and have that amazing project- based learning of what is this going to look like in our school to achieve our goals. So I think the answer to your

question really is that is the problem and the challenge in and of itself. And that's our opportunity, and that's my inspiration in terms of my leadership practices, is actually answering that question of, okay, how are we going to do that? Another way that we've done that, too, is to look at our opportunities through our team meetings that we have. So we make the time and put that time aside to connect with the various leadership groups within our school, the support staff within our school—have that ongoing dialogue around what things look like.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:12:09]:

Thanks, Andrea. That makes a lot of sense. And although I know we're talking about student voice, I think if we're not talking about how we mobilise that and really build the capacity for us to build that into our pedagogy, it kind of doesn't mobilise itself, which is really important.

Andrea Gill [00:12:24]:

Something I wanted to share, too, is in my current school, we actually have a learning garden, and that space has been an incredible area of inspiration and student leadership. And that's been done through the support of staff and the initiative from staff. That's through grant applications, through opportunities to direct school funds in terms of receiving materials, opportunities for cross curricular collaboration. So we have, you know, kindergartens that are going out there with our intermediate students to learn about how to plant different plants and herbs and vegetables into the garden and seeing in the fall the harvest happen, and having the opportunity for students to create different spices and different food items and understand just the cycle of what a garden is and what that can look like, and being able to contribute that into our breakfast program has been incredible. So when we talk about project based learning, that's an ongoing piece to our school that is kind of a living and breathing example of what inquiry-based learning is and how student voice and student leadership can achieve that. And that's also the way that, as a leader, I can support staff within the school to meet those needs for kids and to provide materials and time in order for that to happen. It's just a beautiful space, and every time you walk past it, it really is an incredible inspiration to everyone that walks into the school. And it creates a partnership between families, community members, various stakeholders, students and staff. And it really is a thriving area in our school.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:14:05]:

Thanks, Andrea. It sounds like you're really contributing to the creation of a really rich learning environment there, one that really centres student voice and is creating, you know, opportunities for agency for both students and for staff through some of those strategies and processes that you're describing there. So, as we're kind of drawing a bit to a close here, I'm wondering if there's one key message or strategy or suggestion that you could leave the listeners with, just how to create those kinds of environments in their own context.

Andrea Gill [00:14:38]:

I think one of the biggest pieces is the listening piece, and in a busy school environment, it can be challenging to take that time, but I do think that's really important. So modelling that listening as a leader and taking the time to listen to all student voices, input ideas, and also having, like I said earlier, the humility to look at things with an open mind and knowing that it may not be

perfect the first time, but having the opportunity to try, I think, is key. Project-based learning, in my experience in schools, increases student engagement and achievement. It fosters that joy and that connection. We see kids that are excited to come to school, excited to learn and write and share about what they are doing. And the more that we do that it becomes contagious, really in the building, because those ideas build and innovate off of each other. And so it becomes almost like a positive snowball effect where we see one idea spark into another. And that really is the world in which we all live.

Andrea Gill [00:15:40]:

The more that we're able to connect and collaborate and integrate our ideas together, the better. So my one takeaway would be to start somewhere, to try something and to, you know, be transparent about this is what our goal is, and this is how it's supporting our goals as a school and the feedback we're hearing from kids and staff. And to know that it, you know, provide yourself with permission and those that you're working with, that it may not be perfect the first time, but that's where the fun is. That's where the joy is, and that's where the modelling is for kids, that learning is about trying and having that iterative process, where as we try and we further adapt our strategies and our ideas, that's how we create those amazing, inclusive, buzzing kind of learning environments that when you walk into the school, you walk into the classroom, you can see that joy of learning come alive.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:31]:

Thanks for really emphasising those messages about joy and taking risks. I love that you've highlighted listening and humility. I would say those two things take a lot of work and practice, for sure. And you've given us a lot to reflect on, and hopefully we've ignited ongoing conversations about amplifying student voice. Thanks again, Andrea. It was great to chat with you today.

Andrea Gill [00:16:53]:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a great podcast and I'm so happy and honoured to be part of it.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:02]:

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 [00:17:14]:

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.