

Stephen Hurley (00:14):

Hello, and welcome to Leading Authentically a special podcast series developed by Ontario's three Principal Associations, ADFO, CPCO and OPC, to examine school leadership using the lenses of identity, equity, anti-oppression, accessibility, inclusion, and full participation for students with special education needs and students with disabilities. We're hoping that this series will help school leaders better understand how self-knowledge about their own complex identities can better prepare them to also learn about and understand the students whom they serve, resulting in more inclusive learning environments. We know that if we as principals and vice principals hope to lead schools to create the best environment for every student, we need to first understand who we are as individuals. How do our various identities intersect? How might the biases we bring to our work influence the way we lead and instruct? How can we ensure that every student has the best opportunity for learning and wellbeing? For this episode, we've gathered the voices of four Ontario leaders, each of whom brings a wealth of experience and diversity of perspective to the table. So, let's dive right in. We asked each of our guests to introduce themselves by reflecting on their identities and how that self-knowledge of identity prepares them for some of the difficult and uncomfortable conversations that often accompany this work. Cassandra Jack is a principal with the Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board.

Cassandra Jack (01:48):

So, I guess I would start by sharing that I do identify as Black. My parents both came from Trinidad and found Canada to be home. So, I do have perhaps a different perspective when it comes to talking about areas of discomfort because there is such a small population of administrators, not only locally in my own school board, but I know provincially that are part of black administrator numbers. So sometimes I'm having conversations where it's, it's awkward, it's difficult, it's challenging because of who I am and who I represent when I'm speaking with staff and even students. But it's coming from a place where I think I would say that people recognize that I want to be part of the solution and be, you know, goal-oriented and problem solving focused. The other side of it is recognizing that I also have benefited from some points of privilege, and that puts me in a position of authority. And I have to also recognize where I've upheld, perhaps as a system, some barriers or not being aware of how things that we have decided as a school, as a system have impacted students negatively, even though I try to, to, to stay hyper-focused and hyper-aware. And this isn't, new goal of mine. It's something I've been advocating for and being a part of those conversations before it was trending, as they say, but recognizing and reflecting, just being a reflective practitioner.

Stephen Hurley (03:25):

Krista Tucker is a principal in Ontario's Near North District School Board

Krista Tucker (03:30):

So, for me, a lot of these areas are uncomfortable or produce discomfort when I come in contact with them because the fact is I am a white, heterosexual woman who has no disability. So, I live with a lot of privilege, and, because of that, that also requires a lot of learning on my part to be able to not have those areas of discomfort. But my intersectionalities are few, and so I, I need to constantly, as a leader in a school, I need to be aware not only of the intersectionalities of students, staff, and families, but also how everybody is interacting and understanding those intersectionalities in a good way within the building so that we aren't promoting racism or perpetuating stereotypes or being ableist in ways that are just not acceptable within the school settings.

Stephen Hurley (04:37):

Michelle Couthino is principal of equity and inclusive education for the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board.

Michelle Couthino (04:44):

I identify as South Asian. So, when I first started this work, I came in with this mentality of, oh, you know what? I get it. I get it because I was discriminated against. I felt that I know what it's like, and I thought that was my pass, right? That was my pass, and that I didn't have to do the work as deeply because I, as a racialized person, have been discriminated against. In doing the work, I've realized that intersectionality plays a role in how we proceed, but also that it's not about this idea of oppression olympics and all oppressions are the same. They're not, they're very distinct and they're very different. And personally, I realize that my success as, as a South Asian and as part of the South Asian community is really built on anti-black racism and the impacts on the Black community. And I had to come to that realization that yes, I had been discriminated against, but anti-black racism, ability, homophobia are all oppressions that I have no experiences with, and they don't translate from one to the other.

Stephen Hurley (05:58):

And last, but certainly not least, Sherron Grant is a principal with the Toronto District School Board.

Sherron Grant (06:04):

I do identify, as a black woman, I guess I would say, a cisgendered black woman, of Caribbean descent who was born abroad, but pretty much did all of my upbringing, my education here in Canada. And truthfully, I've never really have seen myself or considered myself to have any type of power or privilege, really, until I became an administrator. And truth be known, I had to be told that I had power and privilege in my role. But at the same time, I do have to be very careful about how I present myself, that when I'm really pushing an initiative, a strategy, making changes in the school, I know I'm, I might be questioned about the decision that I'm making, and that is it coming from some type of biased decision. Am I doing this type of work because I'm Black and I'm doing this work for the Black students? And the truth being known, because I under understand the struggle of black students because I have lived that struggle and I've seen my siblings and friends and so on live that struggle, yeah, there's gonna be a little bit more effort on my part, more intentionality on my part to help that section of my student population, because I know the barriers and the, the systemic obstacles that are unfortunately in their way that are slowly breaking down.

Narrator (07:37):

So, it's one thing, albeit an important thing, to become personally aware of just how complex and interconnected pieces of our identity are. But as school leaders, we also need to be aware of how these inside voices get spoken out loud in our practice. How does our self-knowledge show up in our professional encounters with staff, students, and our community? Well, for principal Cassandra Jack, it's about intentionally connecting her commitment to equity with the realities that are expressed in the stories and data from her school community.

Cassandra Jack (08:11):

It's having really deep conversations with staff. Sometimes I share personal stories. Sometimes I allow, you know, video—we have such a wealth of resources and articles and data, most importantly to look at. We have student data that we gather most recently we have staff census data that we can look at as well. I'm fortunate to also be part of some provincial committees through CPCO. And so, I get to look at some provincial data, and we're no longer assuming or guessing or wondering or inferring what the impact of that data is. We have it. And so, it's really looking at hard cold facts and seeing where is the disproportionality, where are the strengths? Where are the needs? And, and setting set goals, setting, you know, priorities based on that information. And so, I, I make a point. I communicate weekly you know, weekly updates. We have monthly staff meetings, and then my daily interactions are always around finding those opportunities and building the relationship. The relationship has to be there, but really infusing and building in those opportunities to have conversations. I think Courageous Conversations is, is Leadership 101 these days so that we can correct any barriers, correct any missteps, and to ensure that every child has an equitable outcome.

Stephen (09:52):

Krista Tucker uses her understanding of equity to interrupt and challenge practices that may be entrenched in tradition, and the argument that, well, this is the way we've always done it.

Krista Tucker (10:03):

It's an impetus for me to be sure that as the leader of the building, I am working hard with the staff to understand why having diverse texts in the classroom matter, and how is it that we are going to acknowledge the different celebrations that occur throughout the year that are not just the Judeo-Christian holidays that have traditionally been celebrated in the building, or, you know, even when it comes down to why are other schools having school name changes and having those conversations about what it means to enter buildings where the names are harmful to your community. So, I really just think that my lived experience has allowed me to use that power and privilege as a leader to be able to make some changes.

Krista Tucker (10:58):

You're a human being as a school leader, and you recognize that there are traditions, but you know, in those moments of having emotions about hearing the words, "it's tradition", you want to be able to stop and call yourself out on "don't be angry. This is where somebody is, and I need to meet them where somebody is, and I need to call them into this conversation."

Stephen Hurley (11:25):

Krista also reflects on the fact that while this work is rooted in personal awareness and self-reflection, there's a great need for the support of other leaders who are also on this journey.

Krista Tucker (11:34):

There is nothing like being in a room full of leaders who are doing great things and want to do even greater things. That energy is something that I thrive on. We need to be able to talk openly about how it is that we dismantle those barriers, how we get over and around them, and find the ways through and what it is that we can do for each other in those moments. I wanna be able to pick up a phone, and

phone a friend, and say, “Oh my gosh, this is what I'm dealing with, with my particular situation, and this is where I wanna go. Do you have any ideas how to get there?”

Stephen Hurley (12:21):

Michelle Couthino encourages school leaders to expand their sense of the voices in the room by going beyond staff conversations and looking at, and listening to, other voices that are part of the school community.

Michelle Couthino (12:34):

Sometimes we don't know what we don't know, and so student voice and community voice plays a really big role in helping people with privilege to understand what it looks like to not have that privilege. And so, one of the things that we've done, and I've done in this role is made a concerted effort to meet with students, to meet with families, to ask them pointed questions about how their identities are either uplifted at schools or not heard. And if they're not heard, how can we uplift them?

Stephen Hurley (13:23):

And for Sherron Grant modeling, a sense of humility allows her to access the voices of her community in some very powerful ways.

Sherron Grant (13:31):

I connect. I speak to my families; I speak to my staff. I speak to colleagues who are on the same journey as me, and who identify as Black, as female, as school leaders. And I get input and advice from them affirming maybe things that I'm doing right, and, you know, my thinking that's going down the right path, but also perhaps challenging my thinking and challenging my actions and or my reactions to certain situations. So, I really have to demonstrate the humility to seek advice, to seek help. And in so doing, I'm hoping that I'm also modeling that for the staff that I work with and even my fellow administrator colleagues of having that humility so that I can do the best job that I can do, and be the best leader and the most effective leader that I can be for all of the students that are in my school building.

Narrator (14:32):

Now, we know that an important part of the conversations about Equity and Leadership centre around the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the responsibilities that educators have to lean into those recommendations in order to help make our systems more equitable for Indigenous students. This is an area in which all of our guests expressed a need to learn more, but as you might expect, each of them had a different approach to that learning.

Krista Tucker (14:59):

In 2012, I was with a different board, and I took on the role as the First Nation Metis Inuit Equity Resource Teacher in that board. And I was very clear from the beginning, I'm a white person doing this work. And so, in that role, I had the opportunity to go to Edmonton for the last day of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and bear witness. And I was really lucky to be traveling with some indigenous colleagues, you know, and one of them didn't know me very well and wondered why I was there. She assumed I was Indigenous, and, and when she found out I wasn't, her question to me was

massive, because she said, what are you taking back? Where, where are you gonna take all of this? And that was a big reflective piece for me, and it really informed a lot of the work that I did since, you know after that, and since then.

Michelle Couthino (16:05):

In my role, I have the privilege of meeting with elders. And, you know, it's funny because it took me a while to realize that listening in an Indigenous context, is much different than a colonial context. So, for many, many meetings, I would just sit and listen. Now I'm able to meet with elders. You may not be able to do that as a school leader, but there are lots of opportunities on social media through podcasts, books. It's about listening to the voices of those communities and understanding the loss and working to atone for that loss.

Sherron Grant (16:50):

And so, I took a course at that time through the University of Alberta, and I'm actually currently taking my second course through the University of British Columbia. And again, just learning about what reconciliation really means, because that's, that's been the thing is in different conversations I've been in, people aren't really able to explain to me in a way that I understand, but I'm really enjoying the learning. I'm definitely making the effort and the time to read more books. I know in our various families of schools here in our board, our superintendents have been giving us different books, either giving us the books as gifts or recommending titles. And so, I've been taking advantage of that and reading a few books. I take the time to share with family and friends and colleagues, to not just keep the learning to myself and whenever I have opportunity. So, when I'm in a situation where there are, are Indigenous community members there, I try to engage in those conversations and, and to learn from them.

Cassandra Jack (17:56):

Yes, we can all have our own experiences trying to make sense and navigating these conversations and learning from our elders, learning from those who are in the community, and the work that needs to be done. So, I just, I leave myself vulnerable to hearing and learning all the time. I feel like I'm in a constant, I, I joke with the students, oh, I'm buffering. I'm still figuring it out. I don't have an answer on that yet, because I just wanna make sure that I'm giving, you know, the pause and the reflection that's, that's required, that's necessary—that's key to making sure that the atrocities that happen in the past are not repeated in the future. And to learn from mistakes.

Stephen Hurley (18:45):

We're going to be dedicating a future episode in this series to some of the practical ways that leaders are bringing this equity work to life in their schools and communities. But we thought we would give you a bit of a preview and a sense of what specific things today's guests are up to when it comes to their equity-based leadership. For example, Cassandra Jack points to the changes in the depth and breadth of her school's work around Black history.

Cassandra Jack (19:10):

So, we're really taking a different approach. We're really trying to elevate the untold stories because within our history, we know that there's been a predominant narrative that's been shared. And I said, I don't want that for our students. I don't want students to feel that there's only one version of the story. There's a lot of stories of resistance and uprising and celebration, and there's a lot of pain, and there's a

lot of struggle. That is infused in the conversation naturally. But I said I really would like us to focus on the untold stories, and it's kind of emerged a theme. A teacher a couple of days ago said to me, you have really struck a chord with me, and I can't stop thinking about what you've personally shared. The idea that we are doing what we can to ensure that the students in our classrooms have hope, have a future. And if we're, if we're doing that hard work, we ourselves are becoming better people in the process.

Stephen Hurley (20:19):

Krista Tucker shares a couple of examples. First, she talks about digging into a book study with other colleagues.

Krista Tucker (20:26):

Recently I participated with five other white VPs in reading Resmaa Menakem's "My Grandmother's Hands", and doing that work myself, doing those reflection body work pieces from the books so that we were gaining an understanding without putting a burden on any of our colleagues who were African Caribbean or Black-identifying colleagues. You know, we, we began that white caucus work to try and ensure that we were doing better.

Stephen Hurley (21:03):

Krista also speaks about how her learning and reflection have led her to think about special needs students in her schools in a more intentional way.

Krista Tucker (21:12):

I do work in a building where we do have two self-contained classrooms and just working to ensure that students within those classrooms are included in activities in everyday mainstream opportunities that are occurring while also meeting their needs. Right? So, you know, yes, making sure they're invited to the assembly, but do we have earmuffs for them if the noise is overly stimulating? How do we make sure that that happens? And so, for me, it's in ensuring that all of the equipment is in place in the special education rooms that is needed for students to engage with every other student in the building. It's providing opportunities for other students to engage with the self-contained classrooms.

Stephen Hurley (22:04):

Michelle Couthino returns to her thinking about the system level work around truth and reconciliation.

Michelle Couthino (22:10):

So, in our leadership, one of the first things we did to protect Indigenous ways of knowing and being is we set really clear guidelines about what activities people can do and what they can't when they are looking at Indigenous peoples, you can't make dream catchers. You can't make medicine wheels; you can't make totem poles. That's not our culture and we need to stay out of it. So, when we talk about practical solutions in leadership, that's what I think will institute change. Those practical solutions also serve to facilitate conversations, right? So, if you say, we're not gonna be making dream catchers anymore, people will want to know why. And then you invite them into that conversation, and you share a little bit of knowledge, and you also bring them on the path to reconciliation.

Stephen Hurley (23:06):

And Sherron Grant has some very personal experience in working with students with disabilities. And this shines forth in her sense of advocacy as well as her work with parents.

Sherron Grant (23:17):

I'm also the parent of a child with a disability. And so, again understanding that having that lived experience, absolutely my passion's going to be that much stronger and helping, again, to educate and empower the parents that I work with so that they have the tools that they need to better advocate and support their child to be as successful as possible throughout the school system.

Stephen Hurley (23:44):

So, we're hoping that this first episode of Leading through Equity has resonated with you as a school leader, and has encouraged you to consider how deeper reflections about your own identities can be a catalyst for some pretty powerful work in the area of equity for all students in your school. But by way of conclusion, we'd like to give the last word to our guests and some final thoughts and reflections of their own. Our thanks to Cassandra, Jack, Krista Tucker, Michelle Couthino and Sherron Grant.

Sherron Grant (24:17):

It's whatever we do. When we go back to that African saying, it takes a village—it takes a whole village to raise a child. We, as the school leader, are kind of the organizer—orchestrator—of that village and doing our best to make sure that village is whole and healthy. And at the centre are our students. And what we will do for the most challenged student in that space—how we think about that student and their family—that will overflow in our support for all of the students and all of the families in our school.

Cassandra Jack (24:58):

And to ensure that every child has an equitable outcome, no matter what their background, no matter how they arrived in our school, and that they are, you know, a creation of God with potential. And that brings me hope every day when I come to work, even on the tough days, because there are many <laugh> on the long days, and the days are long. Many days are long. But the idea that we are doing what we can to ensure that the students in our classrooms have hope, have a future. And if we're doing that hard work, we ourselves are becoming better people in the process.

Krista Tucker (25:48):

I can't draw out a map that says, this is how I got there. Underneath everything is reflection, reflection, reflection. So, the impact is far-ranging. I don't think it just stops at the schoolhouse door. I think it goes well beyond that.

Michelle Couthino (26:08):

I was a vice principal in a school for three years, and part of my responsibility was just to check the plant, right, to go around, check the building, make sure everything was great. One night I went back to pick up some paperwork and there was a wheelchair user who was trying to open the door. And I said, oh, can I help you with that? And she said, sure, that'd be great. And I stopped and I said, why don't you just press the accessibility button? And she said, because it hasn't worked in years, I never thought to check the button. I never thought to check the button because I have that privilege that I don't need to. So,

when we think about privilege, we have to think about it, and quite literally, as the doors our privileges open, the places that we are allowed to participate and experience because of our privileges, and how can we open those doors for others?

Amy Johnson (27:11):

My name is Amy Johnson. I work in the Renfrew County District School Board as the system lead for equity, anti-racism and anti-oppression. My role in this project has been to be the eyes and ears of the broad umbrella we call equity, diversity, and inclusion. This work is difficult and humbling. It is human, and it asks us to look into the core of who we are as a person. It requires us to look at ourselves in the mirror over and over again, to locate ourselves as an individual, an educational leader, a global citizen. And then when we think we understand ourselves, we meet a new person, have a new encounter, learn another nuance about the human experience, and back to the mirror we go, and we look closer and deeper. This process of understanding ourselves and locating ourselves again and again is arduous, sometimes painful, and sometimes joyous.

Amy Johnson (28:19):

We can't afford to feel the shame and guilt about the privilege we are afforded by our positions, our salaries. We must work to use this as a way to dismantle systems of oppression, systems of oppression that exist in our world, across Turtle Island, in Ontario, and indeed in the publicly funded education system. Acknowledging that the system that employs and privileges us was built upon inequities, these active and current oppressions, is the first step to really seeing our reflections in the mirror. It is the first step to seeing ourselves as crucial to honoring and valuing those who we serve—our students and our families. And it is a process. We look in the mirror and search within. We connect with others, we respond to the calls for action, and we interact, in our schools, in our communities, with our families, and then we go back and look in the mirror again. Looking in the mirror allows us to see more clearly each time we look out the windows and open the doors.

Stephen Hurley (29:39):

Leading Authentically would like to acknowledge the participation of the three Principal organizations in Ontario: ADFO, CPCO and OPC, as well as the generous support of the Ontario Ministry of Education. For more information on this project, please visit your Association's webpage, and you can find those addresses in the show notes. For Leading Authentically, I'm Stephen Hurley from voicEd Radio. Thanks for listening.