

Speaker's Corner Transcript:
Atala Andratis (Grand Erie)

Stephen Hurley [00:00:08]:

In October 2023, participants from Ontario district school boards, education stakeholders and scholars focused on educational equity and human rights gathered at Toronto Metropolitan University to share practices around equity based initiatives, along with creating space to reflect on and commit to steps towards greater action in support of enhanced equity for elementary school students, voicEd Radio is honoured to bring you some of the many conversations that took place before, during and after this year's symposium. Welcome to Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education.

Stephen Hurley [00:00:49]:

So, my guest today from the Grand Erie District School board, she's the Equity Lead for the entire district. It's Atala Andratis. Atala, welcome.

Atala Andratis [00:01:00]:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Stephen Hurley [00:01:02]:

And what brings you to this symposium?

Atala Andratis [00:01:05]:

I'm a very passionate educator when it comes to everything equity, inclusion, culturally relevant and responsive, sustaining pedagogy, and definitely an asset-based lens. As an educator, I feel that all students can learn ... how can we create the environments for students to be successful, regardless of who they are?

Stephen Hurley [00:01:27]:

Anyone in education today understands the term equity, but for people outside of education, we use that a lot. How do you describe equity to people? Other people?

Atala Andratis [00:01:41]:

Equity? We know and understand the word based on a dictionary definition, as everybody gets what they need. However, I always like to add the extra sentence that is ... removing barriers. It's not just providing what everybody needs, but it's also removing barriers that already exist, that are preventing us and our students and people to actually have accessibility to what they need. So, it's not so much providing, but it's also removing barriers, especially when it comes to systemic barriers that need to be removed and dismantled.

Stephen Hurley [00:02:16]:

So, each of the panels over the past couple of days were asked to identify what some of those barriers and the resultant challenges were. As you listened to the panels, did you hear barriers that maybe you hadn't thought of, or were they all pretty familiar to you?

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Atala Andratis [00:02:32]:

I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but they are all very familiar, very palpable, very real, because, yeah, it's something that I do see on a daily basis.

Stephen Hurley [00:02:42]:

On a daily basis, yeah. So we've been talking about barriers for many years, and they're recognized and recognizable. How do we begin to push them aside, dismantle them? It's not a matter of leaping over the barriers, but how do we make this talk of barriers actionable?

Atala Andratis [00:03:04]:

I'm a true believer in relationships, and building relationships and relationships actually begin with dialogue. I'm a true believer that having dialogue, having a conversation, it's crucial. I'm also very strong when it comes to really understanding language so what are the definitions of some words that when we use them, do we have common understanding about those words? Because sometimes we use words assuming that we understand what they mean, and then that sometimes creates a little bit more problems or more barriers rather than kind of dismantling. So, when I talk about dialogue, that it's dynamic dialogue, meaning that how can we build common understanding about certain things in order to reach a solution?

Stephen Hurley [00:03:49]:

What are some of those words?

Atala Andratis [00:03:51]:

So, dialogue, for example, dialogue, to me, it's different than a conversation. So, when we are talking about dialogue, it's like really building a common understanding about an issue. Sometimes, especially when we talk about equity, inclusion, all these antiracist, anti oppression topics, sometimes we struggle as humans trying to understand what we mean by those words, especially when it comes to antiracism or anti oppression. So, by having dialogue, it's like, how can we build common understanding about what we want to do? Because it's not trying to change each other's ideas or beliefs, because that's impossible. I truly believe that we cannot change people. We can definitely build a common understanding and reach a solution for something. But in order to do that, we need to build common understanding. So, what is the common ground as educators, the common ground or the commonality will be our students and the success for students.

Atala Andratis [00:04:45]:

So how can we have that dialogue to build understanding? And how can we provide better environments and better opportunities for our students so they can be successful rather than each other?

Stephen Hurley [00:04:55]:

So does the word consensus figure into that dialogue?

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Atala Andratis [00:05:00]:

Sometimes. And that's something I have learned also from my Indigenous colleagues. When it comes to, I know in my school board, we are very fortunate enough where we're actually on the territory of the Anishinaabe and the Haudenosaunee people. So, six nations of the Grand River, one of their practices is consensus. So sometimes we can spend hours and hours having dialogue in order to reach consensus. Unfortunately, because of the systems that we live on, time sometimes doesn't allow us to really have that consensus. But I think that we dialogue when we can somehow build a common understanding of what is the purpose that we want to achieve. I think we can go further rather than kind of fighting with one another or trying to change one another, which is impossible to do.

Stephen Hurley [00:05:49]:

I remember years ago attending some workshops with the Institute for Cultural Affairs, ICA, and they defined consensus as not everyone agreeing, but everyone walking away feeling that their voice has been heard. And we know, you know, that sometimes in education systems, we make decisions before we've heard voices. How do we develop the patience to authentically listen before we decide?

Atala Andratis [00:06:20]:

100%, I think listening is one of those gifts that we're missing. The systems, the society that we live on really kind of has kind of forced us to really move so fast that we don't actually stop and listen as educators. Something that is really missing, and that I do see in education, is that we're not necessarily listening to our students. We keep talking about, we want to have student voice and we want to ask them, and we want to think, how can we respond to their needs? But I think the listening component, it's missing, because when we are actually listening to them, they are the ones that have the solutions. And I don't think we're ready sometimes to really listen to them. And when we're actually listening, it's really hard for educators because we need to also acquire more humility in order to accept and to reflect in what they are saying. It really means for us to change our practice. And sometimes I think the system has conditioned us as educators to be as well.

Atala Andratis [00:07:24]:

We call the holders of the knowledge and sometimes them challenging us. As that saying goes, it's a hard pill to swallow. So, we don't necessarily listen to them, so we just move on without listening to them.

Stephen Hurley [00:07:39]:

As you've listened over the past couple of days, what have you heard that maybe you didn't expect to hear or that was a little transformative for you?

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Atala Andratis [00:07:53]:

I think the inspiring thing is that to see so many people that sometimes in my role, it might be lonely. Sometimes it's like, can I keep doing this work? Can I keep fighting this battle? But I think coming to opportunities like this, it just kind of gives you that energy, that motivation back. It kind of reignites you to say, like, oh, there is a lot of people thinking the same way and wanting to do this work, because it's hard work. Equity is hard work. And I think it was said the first day, first thing in the morning, it's really hard work, it's tasking, it's really emotional. So, I think sometimes having opportunities like this, it really kind of invigorates you to keep going, which I'm hoping we can form a little bit of a network that we can keep in touch with each other and sharing ideas and sharing resources because it can get lonely sometimes.

Stephen Hurley [00:08:44]:

So, you work in a school district with 75 schools?

Atala Andratis [00:08:52]:

About 70, I should be checking and should know this from the top of my head, but I think it's between 72 and 74 schools. So, 52 elementaries and the rest secondary schools.

Stephen Hurley [00:09:04]:

And do you work directly with teachers? Okay, so, teachers, Milton Chen from Edutopia used to say that teachers – I've misquoted it, it was not Milton Chen, but someone from Edutopia used to say, teachers need something for Monday, and something for one day. And so how do you kind of provide the aspiration of one day but the practicality of Monday?

Atala Andratis [00:09:29]:

Yeah, that is a challenge as educator. So, I am a teacher by trade, too, and I find that sometimes, as we say teachers, we are the worst students sometimes, and we want the solution. Again, we were trained in this system that we are fixers. We want to find solutions yesterday, and we want things, you know, tell me what to do, which I often hear. Tell me what to do, and I will do it. The problem, or the challenge, as I like to call it, with equity, is something that we do not do. We do not do equity.

Atala Andratis [00:10:06]:

We become. It's a lens. It's something that you embrace, that you breathe, that you see through, and that's a mind shift. And sometimes it really challenges our beliefs, our values. We have to change our biases. I mean, challenge our biases and do a really introspection and a reflection, and that is hard. I think any human being really struggles to actually see deep down and recognize your challenges. So, I think as educators, sometimes there is a little bit of a contradiction about what we were trained to do and where we are kind of facing, especially in education now, that it's really challenging with things that we were, I guess, conditioned to do.

Atala Andratis [00:10:46]:

I think part of the challenges that I see with my colleagues is that, and we heard it today, they want to do the work.

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Atala Andratis [00:10:55]:

It's not that they don't want to, but sometimes it's a little bit of that self-doubt. How can I do a good job? We keep hearing they're making mistakes, but to me, not doing anything is definitely more harmful than making a mistake, because we're human beings, so we're going to make mistakes no matter what. And it's like, how much faster can we recognize them, clean them, recognize our biases, stop them, change them, face them, and then we move on. And I think together, we can be better in supporting one another.

Stephen Hurley [00:11:26]:

Yvonne Kelly, in her presentation this morning, mentioned the new book by Paul Gorski and colleague. And in the title, it had that idea of fixing. We like to fix as teachers, and we see problems to be fixed, problems to be solved. So, in your work, how have you been successful in maybe convincing people that our students aren't problems to be solved or problems to be fixed?

Atala Andratis [00:11:58]:

100%. I really am a Paul Gorski fan too, so I have read the book. Definitely we are in a business. Education is a business, but we are definitely in a business not to fix students. We teach students, and we are there to kind of see them fully as who they are. And I love, again, learning from Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It's a holistic approach. We see the whole student.

Atala Andratis [00:12:23]:

And part of my vision or my initiative, or however we want to call it, to support my colleagues, is that how can we really build relationships with students and really getting to know them, getting to know them as learners, getting to know them as individuals, because they are the ones that have the answers for us. And I think when we really take the time to build the relationships with students and really get to know them, then the rest of the academics and the curriculum will fall into place. Because then we can be responsive to their needs, really through that asset-based lens, which we heard too, is like, what can they do? Because in my books, all students can learn. We all can learn. We just need to create the conditions. And as educators, again, we were trained also to create conditions, to be responsive to the needs of students, regardless of who they are. And when we talk about all students, I literally mean all students. And not just culturally and racially diverse, but also neurodiverse, you know, ability.

Atala Andratis [00:13:20]:

And anybody that is in our classrooms, we all come with gifts, and that includes students and teachers. And as my daughter, I have a 22-year-old daughter who's in university doing some research as a master's student. And she actually told me, she says, mom, as a teacher, you should be calling yourself as a learner. We are all learners. We are lifelong learners. So even the definition between student and teacher, that's another barrier. So, I think we are all learners. You should be all learners.

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Stephen Hurley [00:13:49]:

You mentioned getting to know your students, and I remember when I was at the Faculty of Education, we had strategies for getting to know your students. They fill in a form. You read that form, and you meet them at the door. You greet them at the door and greet them as they leave the school. Relationality is much deeper than that, isn't it?

Atala Andratis [00:14:11]:

100%. And I'm so glad you say that, because when we talk about getting to know students, it's getting to know them and understanding their variability and the diversity and keep revisiting. Because as human beings, and we heard it again, we are complex individuals. We have intersectionalities that keep evolving and change. So, we are constantly changing. So, the student or the learner that we meet in September per se, is not going to be the same learner by December. So, we need to make sure that we keep revisiting and revising. And if we're going to call it data to guide our practice, we need to be reflective on that data and then keep constantly checking to see how they are and how we are doing and also have feedback from them, because, as I mentioned, sometimes we don't want to listen and really hear that they are telling us, this particular lesson did not talk to me or it didn't speak to me in a sense that I don't see myself reflected in this particular lesson or unit or whatever we want to call it. And I think we need to take that and change that practice, because what was successful last semester, it might not be successful this particular semester. So, we need to be constantly evolving.

Stephen Hurley [00:15:24]:

Do you remember as a teacher, that Monday morning when someone came down to your classroom with a student, and at that time, it may have been what we called ESL students before the multilingual learner language came. And it was almost like, **gasps**, it was a surprise. It was maybe even seen as a negative thing. Talk to me about the importance of that asset-based lens.

Atala Andratis [00:15:49]:

100%, and I actually relate that personally. So, I myself, and I am MLL or an ESL. I came to this country when I was 16 years old, so no speaking the language in a very rural area in southwestern Ontario. As educators, sometimes we forget the impact that we have on students' lives. One experience, first impression can either make or break the relationship. And sometimes as educators, we don't even have to say something, but our body language actually says a lot. And part of my role in education, again, from my personal experience, so I became the teacher consultant for the Multilingual Language Learners in my board for six years. And something that I did see many times when I was welcoming families and students, and there was a little bit of the roll of the eyes or another one, and they don't speak English and they don't know anything.

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Atala Andratis [00:16:51]:

And then, so talking about the asset-based lens, it really starts with language, with body language, with our attitudes. It's not just teachers, it's also the personnel at school, clerical administrators. So it's something that we need to challenge and change. Even to say they don't speak English, it's like, yeah, they speak something else. English is not yet a part of their repertoire, but they already speak two or three languages. So, they do come with a lot of assets, literacy skills, our literacy skills in any language. So how can we really kind of take that and build a new learning, by taking advantage of what our students bring? Because they are not blank slates.

Stephen Hurley [00:17:32]:

So you had that experience firsthand. Do you remember a student that has come back to you? Do you have a story of a student that has come back to you and thanked you for maybe a different perspective, that asset-based lens?

Atala Andratis [00:17:46]:

Oh, 100%. I have many stories of that. One in particular. We were doing a registration for a family and a very young couple, and they were registering their child for kindergarten. And as we were taking all the information from the family, mom says her name. And then I said, and then she shares her age, and she was 18. And I said, you can be in school. And mom and dad, at that moment, look at me like, what are you talking about? We're already parents.

Atala Andratis [00:18:20]:

We cannot do that. And I said, you both can still go to school. And we make arrangements. So we ended up actually registering mom, dad, and the child for school. And mom actually graduated a few years later from secondary school, and her dream was to become a makeup artist. That's what she wanted to do. So, she ended up going to cosmetology classes within our high school, and then eventually she made it to, I don't know how you call these, makeup school, beauty school. I'm not familiar with the names.

Atala Andratis [00:18:53]:

And later on they come, their children, still within our system. So, it's stories like that that kind of inspire you. And when they say, we saw ourselves reflected in your story.

Stephen Hurley [00:19:04]:

Wow.

Atala Andratis [00:19:04]:

Yeah. That's emotional.

Stephen Hurley [00:19:05]:

Yeah, that's a real gift on both sides. Was there a panel over the past couple of days that you had kind of secretly said to yourself, I want to be on that panel?

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Atala Andratis [00:19:18]:

Probably all of them. They all spoke to me in one way or another, but definitely the Indigenous. Indigenous students, the Black communities, or the black students. I strongly feel that as we keep doing this work, we need to always remember and keep it at the forefront that the Indigenous experience and the Black experience should be at the center of all the work that we do when it comes to Indigenous communities. We heard this morning by Jodi, Indigenous people are not necessarily, and they are not equity seeking people. We need to recognize that their rights are inherited, and we need to make sure that that experience is always at the forefront. And with the same idea, the Black experience, it's something that we really need to learn a lot from, and it's communities and bodies that were and continue to be dehumanized and devalue. So we need to make sure that we are aware of that.

Stephen Hurley [00:20:20]:

I can tell just in the emotion that comes out in your voice that this is important work. You probably go home some days a little overwhelmed by the work. What gives you hope?

Atala Andratis [00:20:32]:

I just need a minute.

Stephen Hurley [00:20:34]:

That's okay, that's okay.

Atala Andratis [00:20:42]:

I think opportunities like this, talking to people that kind of see the need. And especially when it comes to the Indigenous experience, it becomes like a life and death situation. It was spoken about this morning that is one experience that we always need to keep at the forefront. And as educators we hold so much power. This is really emotional for me because sometimes we forget, and I see it on a daily basis, that as educators, sometimes we forget that we're being entrusted with life. Parents trust us 100% and believing that we're going to make the best decisions for their children's future.

Atala Andratis [00:21:34]:

I think it's important that as educators, we keep reminding ourselves that, yes, this is a career, but we need to make sure that we do not forget the power that we hold in our position. We make decisions sometimes that are taken lightly, that have a tremendous impact on somebody's life. So, it's really life and death sometimes.

Stephen Hurley [00:21:56]:

It's really a sacred trust. Yeah. Thank you for this conversation. We'll have another one as well.

Atala Andratis [00:22:03]:

Thank you so much. This was a pleasure. Thank you.

Stephen Hurley [00:22:08]:

For more from the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium, be sure to visit voicEd.ca or wherever you get your favorite podcasts. I'm Stephen Hurley, thanks for listening.