

Speaker's Corner Transcript:
Ingrid Palmer

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 [00:00:51]:

Live from the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium from TMU in Toronto, I'm Stephen Hurley for voicEd Radio, and we are here with another conversation with one of the panelists from this wonderful event, this very powerful event. And we are speaking with Ingrid Palmer, who is the founder of Focus on Ability and IDEAL. She's also the Chief Officer at Realize Canada. She's a speaker. She's a parent. A wonderful speaker. Can't comment, Ingrid, on how wonderful a parent you are, because I don't know, but I'm sure you are.

Ingrid Palmer [00:01:26]:

My kids would differ on what day you ask them.

Stephen Hurley [00:01:29]:

What day you ask them, but that's the plight of any parent, isn't it?

Ingrid Palmer [00:01:32]:

That's the sign of doing a good job. Yeah.

Stephen Hurley [00:01:34]:

Ingrid, what brings you to this symposium?

Ingrid Palmer [00:01:37]:

Oh, I was really honored to be invited by Sejal to participate on the discussion around supporting students with disabilities. So, yeah, I've been really excited to be here and hear from all the speakers.

Stephen Hurley [00:01:50]:

So we've had a lot of speakers so far. We have another couple of panels this afternoon. What has captured your imagination from the symposium so far?

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Ingrid Palmer [00:01:59]:

Well, each one of the panels has been really amazing, including the one I participated on and the two I've heard this morning. So, each one has really brought some thought-provoking meditations to my mind. Yesterday we heard about anti Black racism and a lot of really important points. I think one of the things that really stuck out for me was that point around Black History Month and not focusing on slavery. Yes, yes, that's been a real thorn in my side for many years, to have such an important period for the year for Black students to consistently be focused on slavery and on negativity. And I know from my own children they would try to get out of school during February. My daughter would say, oh, all the students turn around and look at me, I hate it.

Stephen Hurley [00:02:56]:

I've heard that before. And so, beginning from that point of negativity, often by the end of February, we've moved to achievements and accomplishments. But I don't think a lot of people in the audience have realized that's kind of where we go automatically.

Ingrid Palmer [00:03:13]:

Absolutely. It was even distressing for me during the pandemic when all the classes were online. And my granddaughter, who was just starting school, she was in junior kindergarten, and that's where her teacher started. And I was shocked to think that students so young were being introduced to Black history through such a dark period. And I also really think that slavery should not be centered in Black history. It should actually be centered in White history. And so that's a thing that always really surprises me. Why is it attached to our history? It really shouldn't.

Stephen Hurley [00:03:51]:

Yeah, we need to talk about that more. I wanted to move to your panel conversation, and each of the panels has provided another lens on the equity conversation. Equity for disabled students. Can we begin by talking about some of the shifts in language around disability studies and looking at this as in equity, how has the language changed over the years?

Ingrid Palmer [00:04:18]:

Maybe you're referring to whether it's person first. So, a lot of the shift in the language has been moved from talking about a disabled person to a person with disability to encourage people to realize that it's a person living with disability and to see the person first. But there's a lot of reclamation going on, and so there's a divide in the community, as there always is, that there's a diversity of opinion and thought. And so, some people really embrace disability, and I'm a disabled person and other people don't. And I always really try to advise that you go with the lead of the individual. There's no monolithic thought on it, and you'll always come across a diverse of opinions. And so it's always really important to ask someone what their preferences are, then to go with that lead.

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Stephen Hurley [00:05:15]:

So, in disturbing a little bit the language, has that also disturbed or changed the conversation? Has it moved the conversations about ability, disability in a different direction?

Ingrid Palmer [00:05:28]:

I think it has, and I think it always should. I think there always should be shifts, right? And there's always going to be. The problem for me is when folks try to become insistent on having their perspective be the dominant one. And I think that it shouldn't be that way. There's always going to be a diversity in thought, and we really need to get into the habit of embracing that diversity and not making our moves in social justice just another form of suppression.

Stephen Hurley [00:06:00]:

Is the work that you do in disability, would you say, and ability, is that social justice work?

Ingrid Palmer [00:06:09]:

Absolutely. My work is social justice work. Social justice works incorporates influencing mindsets and really working towards making our society and our systems and structures open and more inclusive of everyone, which they haven't been. And so just social justice work is about increasing justice for everyone.

Stephen Hurley [00:06:41]:

So, your organization that you founded is called Focus on Ability, not focus on disability. Can you unpack that? I'm sure there were some conversations about, what do we call this?

Ingrid Palmer [00:06:52]:

There weren't any conversations around what do we call it, I came up with the name and I did that, but I absolutely can tell you that I have had some pushback in the disability community, and I push right back.

Stephen Hurley [00:07:04]:

So tell me about maybe that space of tension that you experience around that.

Ingrid Palmer [00:07:10]:

Well, I have received advice that I should change the name, that some people in the community would find that offensive, and that's okay. But I also feel, as I said before, that there is no one right mode or language, that we have to become comfortable, all of us, with a diversity of expression and thought and opinion. And the reclamation of words is a thing. Crip is a positive word now in the community, and that wasn't always the case. And so that we have to move beyond this one-dimensional thinking, even in our justice work, and really learn to walk our own talk and to be inclusive and to be diverse and accept that.

Stephen Hurley [00:08:00]:

So, what do we want listeners, or what would you want listeners to know about the work that you do at Focus on Ability?

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Ingrid Palmer [00:08:06]:

Right. So, my work at focus on ability is about really having bold and strong conversations, both within the community and outside of the community to increase that shared understanding and thought about the experiences of folks who have been pushed to the margins to bring that awareness into our living realities, and to stimulate improved or more positive thoughts and actions around being more inclusive. And that's not just for persons with disabilities. It's with absolutely every identity that faces a stigmatization, marginalization. My lived experience is around, of course, being a black woman, being visually impaired, growing up in the child welfare system, and having a condition called polycystic ovaries, which has led me to grow a beard as a female. And so, I've also experienced homophobia. And so, my life's work and passion is really around creating pathways and supporting mechanisms that bring stigmatized identities into mainstream and just create a world where everyone feels that sense of belonging and place.

Stephen Hurley [00:09:29]:

So, this work takes you outside of school systems, but we're here this week discussing elementary school systems in particular. How does this work meet up with some of the conversations we're having about elementary education and equity?

Ingrid Palmer [00:09:44]:

Oh, that's such a great conversation, but my work actually began within the school system and branched out to all my other identities.

Stephen Hurley [00:09:53]:

I'm learning so much.

Ingrid Palmer [00:09:56]:

Yeah. And so absolutely like growing. I grew up here in Ontario. I'm a complete product of our Toronto District School Board system, and I've had some really incredible life changing and supporting experiences within school that I credit with where I am today. But I also experienced a lot of the same systemic barriers and negative and detrimental experiences that many in the Black community, in the disability community, in the child welfare community, and in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have experienced. And so I really love to speak to educators and really unpack what helped, what was life changing and really changed the trajectory of my life, the help and support that I received within the education system, and contrast that with the experiences that I had that could have had a really detrimental effect on me and how important the role is of educators in the lives of children.

Stephen Hurley [00:11:02]:

When you think of disability and the way that educators and school administrators approach disability in their own school context, what's maybe a question that an educator could be asking that might help them see that context differently? What questions are we not asking that maybe we should about disability?

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Ingrid Palmer [00:11:26]:

Well, for me, the concept that I really try and push in my engagement with society is really around the term 'interdependence' and really to move the conversation into the pronoun we and not us versus them. The term interdependence is really about how all of us have areas of strength and areas of weakness or areas where we need more support on. And if we can move that concept of need out of just the disability community and just into that realm of all of us, of humanity, that goes a long way into removing the stigmatization that people with disabilities experience. And so, it's not a them versus us. It's not like, oh, they're special. No, we're all special. We all have areas where we thrive and where we lead, and that includes students with disabilities, and we all have areas in which we need support, and that includes students without disabilities.

Stephen Hurley [00:12:27]:

So, do we need to change some of the language around air quotes around "special education"?

Ingrid Palmer [00:12:35]:

Absolutely. Nobody wants to be special in those ways, and particularly students who are in need. And that's why it's really been great to see the education system moving towards that 'push in' model where someone will come into the classroom and help students who could be struggling in a particular area, but that understanding that there are other students who could be struggling as well. And so instead of taking kids out and having them identified as needing special help when the helper actually comes into the classroom, and then is there for everyone who could be needing that help that works towards that destigmatization.

Stephen Hurley [00:13:17]:

So, I began my teaching career in 1984 in Dufferin Peel, and we were talking about integration, and then we started talking about inclusive classrooms. We still have a way to go, don't we?

Ingrid Palmer [00:13:28]:

We still have a way to go. We're working towards it. I think the picture that people should have in their minds sometimes when it comes to inclusion is really where everything is all together. And it's kind of like. And I'm stealing this from someone else who I can't remember, but it's like that smoothie model where everything is just, and you can't see any differences, and. No, think of it more like a fruit salad, where you can still see the individual identities, but we're all together in the same bowl, and we're all mixed in together and interchangeable. But we're not trying to make a smoothie here.

Ingrid Palmer [00:14:02]:

We want to keep that fruit salad, and we're still struggling with that. But that's the goal.

Stephen Hurley [00:14:09]:

And to push that metaphor a little more, if you take the pineapple out of the fruit salad, it's a different fruit salad, isn't it?

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Ingrid Palmer [00:14:15]:

It is. It's a different fruit salad, and we'll have all kinds of different fruit salads, and each one will bring a different flavor and texture, and they're all delicious.

Stephen Hurley [00:14:25]:

I'm going to ask you a question. I know the panel conversations are not over yet, but if you were able to sit on another panel in this symposium, which one would you want to be on?

Ingrid Palmer [00:14:38]:

I would have wanted to be on the one that was focusing on poverty, but I think there's also an intersectionality one coming up.

Stephen Hurley [00:14:49]:

Okay, well, I think I heard yesterday that a lot of the moderated conversations moved into that intersectionality conversation a lot quicker than anticipated, but that's good. Anything else you want to tell us about your work? Or maybe how we could become more attuned to the work that you're doing?

Ingrid Palmer [00:15:08]:

Absolutely. Besides being a professional speaker, I also work, as you mentioned, at Realize Canada, and I am the IDEAL Chief Officer. Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility Leading to belonging. And right now, my work is really focused on two nationwide community research projects. So, where we had disability serving organizations across the country hold community research focus groups within their communities based on their intersections, on the barriers between disability and employment. And so, we heard from women with disabilities, Indigenous folks, Asian, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Black, 2SLGBTQIA+, a number of intersections. And it's been really interesting to see the similarities, the overlaps, but also those really incredible nuanced differences, because we're still thinking of experiences as being the same, as being universal, and they're not. There's so many really impactful, nuanced, negative experiences that different identities are experiencing.

Ingrid Palmer [00:16:18]:

And it's really important that we become more aware of that and really structure and curtail our supports and interventions to meet those differences.

Stephen Hurley [00:16:27]:

That was going to be a final, real question. But I have a final, real question now. I spoke with Karen Murray yesterday and had a conversation with her, and she was pushing for more community engagement in the sense that we're really going to the community to ask them what they think, how they know, and what they know. In terms of the work that you do, and especially when it connects with elementary schools, can we be doing a better job of that? And if so, how?

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Ingrid Palmer [00:17:02]:

Absolutely. I absolutely concur that the community actually holds a lot of the solutions. Community voices have not been heard and have not been upheld. Definitely they have been mined, but then the information they give typically ends up on the shelf. And it's really important that we start incorporating the solutions that are being projected from community and having those incorporated into the solutions. They have to be funded, and they have to be brought to realization because the community knows what they need and where they need that support.

Stephen Hurley [00:17:43]:

Can we just explore that word 'mined' a little more? Because I see it as a negative, almost exploitative type of relationship with a resource.

Ingrid Palmer [00:17:52]:

It absolutely is. In every sector, whether we're talking about government or whether we're talking about education, nonprofit, corporate, we turn to the community and we ask for consultations. And somebody brought that up earlier in one of the panels that we don't need any more research. The communities have been researched enough. Their voices have contributed. What hasn't happened is that their voices have not actually been supported and been funding these solutions that they've been putting forward. And so, communities are really tired of being mined, of being told that we want to hear what you have to say. And then once those solutions have been offered or that input has been given, then it just ends up catching dust on a shelf someplace.

Ingrid Palmer [00:18:38]:

What we need is to actually put these ideals into action and having them funded so that they can actually be realized.

Stephen Hurley [00:18:47]:

So, we have a lot of researchers at this symposium. What do you want to say to them in terms of the way they approach their work? Maybe the questions that they choose to ask and how they engage?

Ingrid Palmer [00:18:57]:

Great. I think that we can learn to lead from the back. And what that means is that we're still following this really colonial ideal of we're the leaders. We lead the discussions, the conversations. We come up with the questions. You fill it in. No, you can provide the space, you can provide the table, and then you can get the hell out of the way. The community knows what is needed.

Ingrid Palmer [00:19:25]:

What they need is the support to do the work and to be moving out of these really structured ways of holding meetings or doing consultations and let the community lead the research and do it in the ways that are comfortable for them. It doesn't have to be sitting around a table. It could be in a kitchen while food prep is going on. And we don't need these structured questions

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as how I delivered my answer yesterday. I didn't follow the protocols that were set out, but all the answers were in that. And so we really need to respect community based research and how it's done and to step away from these structures that we've all become used to.

Stephen Hurley [00:20:04]:

So that means we're going to have to train researchers differently.

Ingrid Palmer [00:20:08]:

Absolutely. And just be more comfortable with not being in the lead and not being upfront to understand that sometimes leadership looks like sitting over there in the back and listening.

Stephen Hurley [00:20:19]:

What gives you hope?

Ingrid Palmer [00:20:24]:

I think I have a lot of hope in our young people. And even just from being here and hearing from the students and the young adults who have spoken, who have shared their living experiences, who have shared their creativity, their poetry, their music. Oh, that gives me so much hope.

Stephen Hurley [00:20:46]:

That response may affect the design of next year's symposium.

Ingrid Palmer [00:20:48]:

And it should, and it should. And we heard that loud and clearly, like who should have perhaps been sitting at the tables and having input? The young people.

Stephen Hurley [00:21:01]:

Well, Ingrid Palmer, thank you for being with me today. Thank you for being at the symposium, and thank you for the work that you're doing.

Ingrid Palmer [00:21:06]:

Thank you so much, Stephen.

Stephen Hurley [00:21:09]:

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.