

Speaker's Corner Transcript:

Pam Agawa

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 [00:00:53]:

Live from the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium. I'm Stephen Hurley with voicEd Radio and we are here with another participant in today's symposium. It's Pam Agawa, who is the Human Rights and Equity Lead for Keewatin Patricia District School Board in what we learned today is not really northern Ontario, but it is north of here. Pam, thanks for joining us.

Pam Agawa [00:01:18]:

Thanks for having me.

Stephen Hurley [00:01:19]:

It's good to see you again. Your voice is on VoicEd Radio more than once, so it's good to have you here and see you in person. What brings you to this symposium?

Pam Agawa [00:01:30]:

So I was on a two year secondment and I wasn't in a school board and I was working with the provincial government. So, in a new role, you need to create new relationships. And I thought, what better than an equity symposium to meet some new people and find folks to collaborate with in my new role?

Stephen Hurley [00:01:47]:

Tell me about your new role.

Pam Agawa [00:01:49]:

So I'm the Human Rights and Equity Lead, and every day I'm learning a little bit more of what that looks like in practice. But essentially I'm there to support students and families and staff, and I'm finding that I'm spending time really looking at the equity pieces of the board and leveraging them in a way that supports students and staff. So, it's going to be a process. But I've come up with a few projects that I'm excited at working at.

Stephen Hurley [00:02:15]:

Now, I know that there are many school districts that have human rights and equity leads. I've spoken to a few of them. Do you connect with each other?

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Pam Agawa [00:02:24]:

We do have a community of practice that's housed through the Ministry of Education, and we meet every month where we can kind of share things that we've experienced, how we've handled them, to kind of support each other in the goals. But there is a community of practice that you can join.

Stephen Hurley [00:02:40]:

So I know it's a complex role, it's a complex context. When you wake up in the morning, what do you tell yourself your work is? What is your role all about?

Pam Agawa [00:02:51]:

Every day it's different. You kind of respond to the needs of the day, that's kind of how I've approached it. I used to overthink things a lot, but being in this career for over 20 years, I've just learned to approach each day with what it needs and build some foundational pieces for the board alongside other folks to try to make things move along.

Stephen Hurley [00:03:13]:

So you've come down to the big city for a couple of days. This equity, specifically focusing on elementary education, what have you heard that maybe has captured your imagination, has riled you up a little?

Pam Agawa [00:03:30]:

I think that when I'm listening, I am reminded of the barriers and the challenges essentially being the same that they were ten years ago. And so the pieces that we keep saying when we're listening today to the Indigenous context that was presented by the panel when Tesa was talking about, stop researching us and start building action, we need to stop doing the research. We have all the data that we need to facilitate some rollout of action that could be responsive to the needs of students and families. And let's just stop researching for a little bit and start working.

Stephen Hurley [00:04:04]:

Okay, so that's interesting. And we just had a conversation where we talked a little bit about that. We were speaking with Ingrid Palmer, who was on a panel yesterday on disability. This symposium was catalyzed by a researcher. There's a research grant supporting it. What do we do with researchers? Are there new questions that they could be asking? Are you asking them to just back away? What new role might there be for researchers in this area?

Pam Agawa [00:04:36]:

Well, I wonder if there could be an evolution of their role. Like, why are they only responsible for research? Wouldn't it be fun for them to participate in the next steps or the next actions that follow the research that they've provided?

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Stephen Hurley [00:04:48]:

So, becoming advocates, activists, research?

Pam Agawa [00:04:54]:

Maybe, or consultants, I think that we silo jobs in a way that they don't move. And we say, you're only responsible for what's in Lane A, but Lane A feeds Lane B.

Stephen Hurley [00:05:06]:

We have this image of researchers being these objective onlookers who aren't supposed to get their hands dirty or messy or really get connected with what they're researching. Is that one of the things that needs to change?

Pam Agawa [00:05:20]:

I think so. I think when you're speaking, and I'm just going to maybe focus a little more on Indigenous conversations. Everything we do has to be done within community and in relationships. And as much as we want to kind of sever that, it's never going to work in building trust and then transparency and support if we aren't building relationships, I think everything has to shift.

Stephen Hurley [00:05:44]:

Yeah. A conversation yesterday with another panelist, Karen Murray. We were talking about that community relationship and how to go out into the community, but a different relationship with what the community knows and how we plug into that.

Pam Agawa [00:06:01]:

I also think it has to be reciprocal. So one of the things that I find that I'm doing lately is really supporting the knowledge on the inside, like the education pieces that can be supportive for students. Sometimes our families don't know how to access them or what are the steps to get that done. And it's not always a transparent process, or the process is written in some really serious education language that is difficult to translate. So when we're going into community, I remember talking to a family, and they were having a barrier around psychological assessments. There are waitlists everywhere in boards, and sometimes some students need them sooner than others. And I'm not sure processes in terms of who's priority, but one of the things that I thought with this one First Nation community, we had education service agreements with them.

Pam Agawa [00:06:50]:

And I said, well, why can't there be a Memorandum of Understanding between the school board and the First Nation community that you can hire your own psychologist to do the psychological assessment? Red tape's so thick. It was so innovative, no one knew what to do with it. But I think that we have to just kind of think outside of the system, and how can we leverage the pieces that are around the system to help support what we need within it? We don't have enough staff.

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Stephen Hurley [00:07:16]:

Right. And so that's a barrier. That's a challenge. Now, we heard a little bit, especially on the panel, that Jodie was on, about some of that, pushing past the protocols and the policies and whatnot. How do we do more of that? Is it a personal thing, or how do you systematize pushing back against a system like that?

Pam Agawa [00:07:41]:

It's funny, we were just in our breakout session, Tesa was in our breakout session. And then I had a moment where, I don't know how we got to it, but the barrier that's the biggest is when we bring forth an idea that could work, the question that comes back to us is, who has done it before? Where has precedents been set, right? And so I said, well, what if this crazy idea that we continue to work as a community of leads, whatever your lead position is, if you're an Indigenous Ed. Lead, if you're a Human Rights and Equity Lead, if you're an Equity Lead and you each choose a lane that you're going to push in, and then you aim to get that. Now I'm going to go to my board with oh, so and so did this in their board, they've set precedent. Well, can we try it? You tend to actually get a yes. But then I was laughing, because isn't that innovation, like setting precedents and doing things that haven't been done before?

Stephen Hurley [00:08:37]:

You have me thinking about the conversation around evidence-based practice, and where does the evidence come from? Unless someone is going out there and being the first to do it or being the second to do all, we love saying that our practice is evidence-based. But how do you start collecting the evidence if you're not doing what you're saying?

Pam Agawa [00:09:00]:

Well, that's in the relationships with the people that you work beside, right. So, you know, I remember a really good example. So Kalinda had written an AQ course in collaboration with a university. I'm going to get it wrong because I'm not even going to try to pretend that I know which one it is. I think I do, but I don't want to be wrong. And then they had this agreement where the board would subsidize the enrollment in the AQ course. And so York at the time, was a provider, and so we were like, well, we can write courses. And so we had written a three part series and we wanted it to be subsidized because a lot of people were saying, well, it's expensive, you know, times are tight.

Pam Agawa [00:09:39]:

Totally get it. And so they're like, well, has anybody else done it? Kalinda's done it in her board, and we were able to subsidize for years after that. You know, I think it's sad when we have to get to a place where I have to come up with who set precedent to be able to move something forward. But at the same time, if that's the system, then let's play that game.

Speaker's Corner Transcript:

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Stephen Hurley [00:10:01]:

Lots of interesting things happening in lots of different contexts, seemingly separate. How do we connect the energy and the innovation and the precedents? How do we make stronger connections between your school district and Dufferin Peel, Peel, Toronto?

Pam Agawa [00:10:22]:

I think all of the relationships are unique, but boards do have to work together. And so I wondered about if the panels weren't so siloed, that might be a good example of showing people how to work beside or alongside.

Stephen Hurley [00:10:36]:

If you were asked to be on one of these panels, which one would you choose?

Pam Agawa [00:10:44]:

I mean, I'd probably just go where I'm comfortable. So probably the Indigenous Ed one. But I've done a lot of work with Black staff, so I think it would be neat to show people how, even though we have two different identities, how we can work together and move both, it's not the right word, but, like, agendas forward and strategize together. Because I had done a lot of work with Charline and so kind of wanted to hear a bit more from her.

Stephen Hurley [00:11:11]:

Yeah. What's not being asked that you wish could be tackled in these two days? I know it's only two days, but.

Pam Agawa [00:11:20]:

That's a good question. I think I'm just in a listening stance, like, in the sessions, because I feel a little bit...I'm just back to finding my voice again and finding my purpose and my new role and what it means, and I'm just kind of listening and thinking about people I can connect with. And you can tell by when you hear somebody and the work that they're doing, like, that's a great contact for me.

Stephen Hurley [00:11:45]:

There have been a couple of occasions this morning where people have noted that they're kind of preaching to the choir, and this is great, and it gives people a chance to network and support each other in their work. The question that I find I'm asking is, how do we move beyond the choir, beyond the denomination?

Pam Agawa [00:12:08]:

The issue is the people who need to be sitting in these rooms is, like, they aren't. The people in these rooms are moving the work and their boards.

Stephen Hurley [00:12:18]:

But what gives you hope as you embark on this new role, as you continue to do the work you've been doing for many years?

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Pam Agawa [00:12:25]:

I think the students, I do like that they're introducing everybody, and you can see their personalities and just they're so intelligent and dynamic and different. And I miss kids. Like, I've been in roles where I've been working with adults every day, and now I have the opportunity again to be back in schools and listening to students and what they need and what they need from the system. And I think now in the position that I hold and working directly alongside our director, Christy Radbourne, that I feel like I can do it. I feel like there's going to be some movement and support, and I'm excited about it. I think it's just a new journey, and I'm excited to be on it with Christy and all of the SO's and the board, but I'm excited to meet the students. I'm going to head up there the week of October 22 and get into some schools.

Stephen Hurley [00:13:16]:

Well, I'm hopeful just listening to you be hopeful. A final real question for you. What new addition would I find in your professional library?

Pam Agawa [00:13:26]:

Oh, I just bought Gorski's book and I feel really bad because I forget who the other author is, but *Fix Injustice, Not Kids*. I'm excited to dig into it. And I talked to Paul a bit about it and he's like, I want a review, so I'm excited to read it.

Stephen Hurley [00:13:43]:

I just picked it up this morning when it was mentioned. Amazon. Thank you, Amazon.

Pam Agawa [00:13:48]:

Yeah.

Stephen Hurley [00:13:49]:

Well, thank you for this conversation. Thanks for being here, and thanks for the work that you're doing.

Pam Agawa [00:13:52]:

Thank you.

Stephen Hurley [00:13:55]:

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.