Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium

PANEL G SUMMARY: Faith-Based Equity

PANELISTS

Joanne Okimawininew Dallaire
Elder (Ke Shay Hayo) and Senior Advisor, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, Toronto Metropolitan University

Aasiyah Khan
Director, Education Programs, National Council of Canadian Muslims

Leora Schaefer
Executive Director, Facing History and Ourselves Canada

Faith is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of religions and beliefs. It is important to remember the diversity and plurality of a faith-based identity, which means different individuals may require different types of supports. In this panel, speakers discussed faith-based equity.

A first step to supporting students of different faiths is to recognize any preconceived biases or prejudice that may exist due to the dominance of colonial systems and discrimination that have long been experienced by these populations (e.g., anti-Indigenous racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, etc.). Aasiyah Khan cautioned against "religious fixation", which is the tendency to label a person with a religious identity and in doing so, deny the other facets of their identity. Advancing equity for students means learning to view each student holistically and not just through the lens of a singular identity—there is no such thing.

"[As Dr. John Amichi conceptualizes] We might come to work zipped up, hiding, concealing, and that takes energy...And you cannot do your best. So, as educators, our role, our responsibility is to create spaces where students can actually unzip and be themselves, and not work to conceal."
- Leora Schaefer

Imagine arriving at school everyday worrying about facing these obstacles, or feeling like you need to conceal your identity. The education system and all its staff have a responsibility to create spaces where students can be themselves without fear of judgement, bias, or exclusion. Potential approaches include: (1) working together with faith-based communities to develop curriculum that accurately reflects their contributions, histories, customs, and beliefs; (2) offering professional development and training about faith-based discrimination and how to affirm student identities, and (3) establishing clearly communicated and enforced policies about addressing and responding to hateful behaviour.

"Discourse is a wonderful place to learn."
- Joanne Okimawininew Dallaire

"We need to acknowledge...the ways in which practice and the public display of some practices of our faith have been problematized."
- Aasiyah Khan

There should not be too much of a focus on trying to create a "perfect space" because all students, families, and communities are unique and have different needs. What we can focus on is providing meaningful allyship and support by listening to people with different lived experiences, different views of the world, and who walk in different shoes than our own. The education system that we currently have is not equitable because it was not designed to be. As a result, teaching for equity and justice means seeing your students through an intersectional lens so that they can each receive what they need to develop their full academic, social, and civic potential.

RESOURCES SUGGESTED BY PANELISTS

- Facinghistory.org *(Personalized resources and support to improve opportunities for all students and improve school culture)*
- Peripheryexhibit.org *(A mixed media experience about ethnic diversity in the Jewish community*
- Unlearnantisemitism.ca *(Resource hub for educators and parents to take action to address antisemitism)*

Toronto Metropolitan University