

***Transcript:***

**Educational Equity Podcast #1: Indigenous Perspectives of Learning and Unlearning**

**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.

And we are here today's episode, Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education, preparing for a symposium coming up in October. I'm Stephen Hurley from VoicEd Radio and I'm joined by Nicholas Ng-A-Fook from the University of Ottawa. Nicholas, good to have you here.

**Nicholas Ng-A-Fook [00:01:10]:**

How are you doing, Stephen, what an exciting night tonight to be here with you on VoicEd Radio.

**Stephen Hurley [00:01:16]:**

Well, it's not exciting because I'm here. It's exciting because we have a room full of guests that we're going to have introduce themselves, and they're all coming from different perspectives on this topic of enhancing equity. And I'm just going to go around the table and ask folks to introduce themselves briefly. Your background, what you're doing, how you place yourself in this work. Kirsten, let's begin with you.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:01:41]:**

Hi everybody, my name is Kirsten Dumont. I'm an Algonquin and Anishinaabe activist, advocate, educator and cultural knowledge keeper within the Ottawa area. I am a young person who has both been through the education system as a student, but also as an educator, and understanding how my lived experiences can help shape and restructure the kind of educational institutions that future generations will be a part of is why I do what I do. So, chi-miigwech, for having me a part of the panel today, and I am so excited to get started.

**Stephen Hurley [00:02:21]:**

Thanks Kirsten, and Stephanie, let's go to you.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:02:27]:**

Hi there, thanks. Thanks for having me. My name is Stephanie Sanders. I am Ojibwe Anishinaabekwe from Curve Lake. I am currently living in the Ottawa region working as an

Indigenous Education Learning Partner with the Ottawa Catholic School Board, and part of my role is to help facilitate and provide resources and professional development for educators to better understand the ways in which they can bring Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing into their classroom, in a way that is respectful and authentic to them and their learning journey as well. And it's been a really fantastic journey this last year in the role to see the amazing growth and fantastic connections that educators can make when they have the right tools, and they understand how to approach this kind of transition towards truth and reconciliation in the classroom.

**Stephen Hurley [00:03:20]:**

Thanks, Stephanie. And we're looking forward to digging into what we mean by 'the right tools'. Excited for that conversation. And we're going to a live class. And Kiera, do you want to just introduce who we have in the room, generally, just to set some context for the class that's participating this evening?

**Kiera Brant-Birioukov [00:03:39]:**

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Stephen. We are an Indigenous education cohort at York University, our Wüléelham program, and I have three brilliant Indigenous women educator scholars in front of me here. I'll start with Marissa, and then we also have Roxanne and Mel, who will introduce themselves.

**Stephen Hurley [00:04:00]:**

So, Marissa, let's begin with you. Tell us about yourself and how you place yourself in this work.

**Marissa Magneson [00:04:06]:**

Yeah. Thank you. Tansi, Marissa. Nisikasan Tkaranto d-oschiin.

**Marissa Magneson [00:04:10]:**

Hello.

**Marissa Magneson [00:04:10]:**

My name is Marissa and I am Cree-Metis on my mother's side and settler, Norwegian, Canadian on my father's side. That's where I position myself. I am an artist, photographer, workshop facilitator, arts educator, juggle many different things. And I'm currently pursuing my doctorate in the Faculty of Education here at York, researching bead work as pedagogy. Thinking about it as a bridge towards cultural reclamation and conciliation. So those are the various aspects that I'm coming to this conversation with. I'll pass it to Roxy.

**Stephen Hurley [00:04:45]:**

Bead work as pedagogy. That's fascinating. Melissa, let's move to you. How do you find yourself in this work?

**Melissa Somer [00:04:52]:**

Good evening. Melissa Somer, and I am second generation on my father's side, Toronto, and on my mother's side, Pennsylvanian Dutch. So long history in this general region here. I am a current student studying my master's of Indigenous education. I am a research assistant for the Wüléelham program, and my work is working towards building relationships and understanding reciprocity in reconciliation for the Canadian community and education system. So, my intersecting position in these structures has really given me a complex experience of diversity in understanding colonial structures as well as Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Stephen Hurley [00:05:40]:**

Thank you very much. And last but certainly not least, Roxanne.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:05:45]:**

Wâciyê. [*Greetings in James Bay Cree*]. Muskwa Dodem.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:05:52]:**

[*Introduction in James Bay Cree*]. So, my given name is Roxanne Gillis and my spirit name is Red Lightning Woman. I'm Bear Clan from treaty nine territory, Fort Albany. I did my double major honors in Gender Women Studies and Indigenous Studies at York University and went on to work at the city of Toronto. I started off as an Indigenous Youth Research Associate and now I'm currently in the Indigenous Consultant position for the Data for Equity unit, and I'm currently in my master's of Education program. Miigwech.

**Stephen Hurley [00:06:26]:**

We wanted to start with equity and what we mean by equity. And each of you has lived experience relating to experiences in education, settler, colonial, elementary, secondary, public or private schooling. And when we use the term equity...images, words come to mind, and I'd like to begin by exploring what that term means for you. Equity. Stephanie, what does equity mean for you based on your lived experience in the system?

**Stephanie Sanders [00:06:59]:**

To me, equity in the classroom means that there is space for everyone to bring their truest self to the table and to not have fear of that. So, a classroom setting where everyone's perspectives and family stories and their history is celebrated and incorporated into one space where we can all learn from each other. Kind of like when you're sitting in circle, everyone is equal. Everyone has an opportunity to speak and to share and to listen and to learn from one another. So, in terms of the classroom settings, to me, I think it's a space where everyone is safe to celebrate that and where the educators are prepared to know how to do that, how to support the students in bringing themselves into the classroom in a way that doesn't cause harm to one another, but celebrates and supports one another.

**Stephen Hurley [00:07:54]:**

Melissa, I'm going to put you on the spot. Listening to Stephanie, does any of that resonate with you? Do you have other ways that you want to explore equity?

**Melissa Somer [00:08:05]:**

Absolutely. I think when it comes to engaging with the scope of equity, there's so many different aspects that need to be confronted and discussed. There's a lot of issues around bias and judgment. And another big piece is being able to come out of your comfort zone and engage in some of these really triggering conversations, because if we're not able to engage in these and prepare our students to engage in these really meaningful, relationship building exchanges, we're really doing a disservice to everyone. And the biggest concern that I find right now is when we look at the way that systems are functioning now, we're very much setting up spaces of disconnection. And there's a lot of concern, I find, with having experiences with exposure to certain kinds of attitudes and behaviors that aren't being addressed when it comes to creating a space that we can't really honor safe, because we're not providing undivided attention to being able to heal from the traumas that we're working with.

**Stephen Hurley [00:09:32]:**

And I know you have ideas on how to enter into those conversations, and we'll get to some of those. I want to move over to Marissa. What resonates with you in terms of what you've heard so far and what would you like to add?

**Marissa Magneson [00:09:46]:**

Yeah, I think just jumping on what's previously been spoken about and thinking about opportunities in relation to equity. So, part of my role as a freelance arts educator is I get invited into schools to bring in workshops and educational content focused around Indigenous studies, but also my perspective as a Cree-Metis woman and looking at that specifically through art. So, I work with a lot of private schools. I work with post-secondary schools as well, and a few public schools. And there's certainly differences between all of those different sectors of education. And thinking about opportunity is a huge component, is funding and access to resources to support these kinds of programs. Seeing what some schools are able to provide, the funding that they have to develop a really beautiful curriculum with Indigenous educators, whereas other schools do not have access to that funding. And so, they're very limited to doing the work in a way that is not breaching cultural appropriation, that is working in consultation.

**Marissa Magneson [00:11:03]:**

And I think that's huge, especially in this kind of era of truth and reconciliation. A lot of educators wondering, how do you even navigate? What are the tools? Tools was brought up, tools for success. And I think opportunities and access to funding is critical in that.

**Stephen Hurley [00:11:22]:**

So when you say funding, do you mean government funding? Could the funding ideally come from other places as well?

**Marissa Magneson [00:11:32]:**

All sources of funding. I also have a background in working in nonprofits in the arts and culture scene here in Toronto. So, a lot of that funding was coming from the government, from grants. It could be coming from sponsorship. There's lots of different pools in terms of funding, but there is an aspect of needing money to develop these things. Right?

**Stephen Hurley [00:11:59]:**

Right. To bring people and experiences like you into schools and classrooms.

**Marissa Magneson [00:12:03]:**

Exactly, yeah.

**Stephen Hurley [00:12:04]:**

Right. Okay, thank you. And Roxanne, what's your take on the conversation about equity as a concept, as an idea?

**Roxanne Gillis [00:12:15]:**

So, I have a bit of a different perspective on equity, because equity is a term that is created in colonial institutions. Right. So, equity is basically an umbrella term for us to all look and silo different genders, different races, and all of these intersecting components. So, for Indigenous people, we get placed in that term under equity, when really, we're looking and seeking validation from an institution that actually created the systemic barriers that we have in place. So equity, to me, is the repatriation of information power and relations.

**Stephen Hurley [00:12:54]:**

Oh, could you unpack that just a little bit more?

**Roxanne Gillis [00:12:59]:**

Sure. So, for example, what Marissa was talking about for funding, in order for us to gain education from a system based on Indigenous knowledge. We have to go to these institutions and seek that funding in order to get it, or seek it from the ministry to develop our own institutions so that we can have a policy or a curriculum in place that is centered around indigeneity. Right?

**Roxanne Gillis [00:13:26]:**

So that means that there are inequities in place within that infrastructure that actually prevent us from developing those things. And then it goes down to information bias. Right?

**Roxanne Gillis [00:13:36]:**

And how are those policies in place in terms of developing an equitable educational institution or an equitable curriculum affecting the people that are gaining that knowledge from that system? So, we're constantly going back to the same place that is actually creating more barriers for us. I brought up in one of my classes, for example, the idea of bringing up a post-secondary institution developed by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people within, let's say, Tkaronto. And the argument was that why would a municipal government want to do something like that, or a provincial government want to do something like that when we are funding sources for those people, right? So, for example, some of us are treaty that have status. So, when we go into these spaces, we're actually a guaranteed money source for these institutions, then we're objectified. So really, it's kind of... this concept of equity really kind of just gets diminished and lost in the process and structure of these places and institutions, because at the end of the day, they are businesses.

**Stephen Hurley [00:14:44]:**

Kirsten, can you tie some of this together and maybe add your own ideas on equity?

**Kirsten Dumont [00:14:51]:**

Of course. Listening to all of the incredible panelists today has been so mind changing. I think about the different perspectives and different lived experiences that so many of us have. And I think about how the thing that we have all pointed in our conversations is the need for inclusion, and how that inclusion can be filled with the equality that we go towards when trying to create an infrastructure that includes Indigenous education. Growing up in this society, I remember going through my own educational journey and wondering where there were teachers that looked like me. Why weren't there people who spoke like me? Why weren't there people who had the same lived experience as me? The same intergenerational impacts that I had held both on my back and in my heart? The people that would come into my classrooms would speak about such beautiful, bright aspects. And because I never lived that life, I never thought that I could be somebody like them. But now I am, at the age of 23.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:16:08]:**

And I think that that's because we're moving forward filled with representation, with the need for that inclusion, for little Indigenous girls, boys, people to look up at us and understand that there is so many different pathways than we could even imagine. Because I remember growing up and never thinking that I could be this person that I am today, due to the lack of representation that was put in front of me. But by having people go into schools, by having people within positions of power who hold indigeneity, is brilliance, is empowering, and it shows society that we are so much more than the trauma that is continuously pushed onto mainstream media. But we are people who also pass down intergenerational strength and love. And that's what needs to be put at the forefront within education to show even society, mainstream society, that we are more than what the media depicts us and displays us as.

**Stephen Hurley [00:17:17]:**

Such aspirational language, I'm going to say, and such aspirational imagery already in this conversation. And thank you all for your unique perspective on this. And I'm going to move forward into that conversation about barriers, because some of you did mention barriers, and we hear a lot about barriers of all types that is preventing this equity vision from becoming a reality on the ground. And so, we talk about individual barriers and structural, systemic barriers, and the larger societal barriers. And I know it's complex and I know it's...Well, it's more complex than it is complicated, but I want to dig into it anyways. So, I'm wondering, Roxanne, if we could just go to you for some first comments on this idea of barriers. How have you experienced barriers? How have you witnessed barriers to these aspirations for equity in your own life, professional and personal?

**Roxanne Gillis [00:18:21]:**

So, I'm going to talk from personal experience. One of the things for me growing up, I have to really backtrack to my childhood, because my childhood is part of my knowledge and experiential learning process, and it shaped and frames my lens of the world, because my childhood was filled with the sexual abuse, the Bible school camps that I had to attend, which we talk about, National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, I have a point to that I want to speak to after. But, it had to do with me not being able to read or write English. And I spoke broken Cree and broken English when I was younger. And I was passed along because, you know, poor Indian girl. So, I was passed along grade three when I came to Toronto, and you know, I was overweight because I was in a northern community.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:19:12]:**

My hair was cut off because I was considered dirty, so they needed to chop it off. And when I walked into these, because I was put into one of the Jewish schools here in Toronto, I was constantly put into the corner and framed as the child that was problematic. And that was because it was a culture shock. I came from a totally different environment where I saw my people all the time, and I felt lost. I felt insecure. So, my perception of school was constantly through punishment. There's something wrong with you.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:19:44]:**

We need to strip you of who you are. And just the other day, I had someone tell me, Roxy, I hear a little bit of an accent in your voice. And they said to me, don't lose that little girl. Don't lose that little voice. Because I walk into these spaces where I have to speak English appropriately. I have to talk to a certain linguistic standard based on the academic system. So, this perception of education had changed and transgressed over time. When I went to high school, and I refused to stand for the national anthem, and I said, I'm not going to stand. This is not something I believe in. And the teacher put me in the dark room of a photography class because she couldn't stand looking at me because that was too much for her. She was very proud of her country. And so, the detrimental effects that had on me and my mental health and my stability, right. I already had problems at home because of intergenerational trauma. Now I'm dealing with it at school. I ended up being passed along

to multiple different schools instead of having to deal with me, which then I ended up at the Native Learning Center. And just out of the Native Learning Center, they have a lot of children that have to deal with students who have a background, like myself.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:21:00]:**

We're all Indigenous students. We all carry so much. But there's an experience point there. Our knowledge is never validated in these academic systems, so we never get a chance to actually find our voice. After about, I think it was about six months into, seven months into my education, I was picked up and trafficked right out of high school. So that goes to show that there's not enough education systems and supports that are from Indigenous-led and Indigenous-run from a knowledge system and a knowledge base where we make Indigenous children feel secure. That's a barrier in itself, stripping the identity. When I gained enough courage, I applied to go to university, and I couldn't write a sentence.

**Roxanne Gillis [00:21:41]:**

For the life of me, I had no idea. I remember I googled it, how to write a proper, structured sentence, and it was Brenda Blondeau who actually supported me at the Native Women's Resource Center to get my education and to achieve it and pursue it. I remember she kept emailing me because I had imposter syndrome. What am I doing here? I don't belong here. I can't do this work right. That Indian girl, little girl inside me was scared. And because I've been stripped of all of these identity barriers or the identity pieces which cultivated into barriers. So those are some of the components that affect education. And how are we supporting Indigenous young people in that education system when the education system is totally structured and built by someone else?

**Stephen Hurley [00:22:25]:**

Kirsten, you wanted to weigh in on this.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:22:27]:**

Yes, I did. And chi-miigwech, for sharing your story, I completely understand what you're saying. And I think that the very barrier is the fact that these educational institutions were not built for the benefit of our people. When we think of education, I think about how crazy it is that my success is supposed to be exemplified within a four year timeline due to a white colonial piece of paper that says whether or not I have earned or have not earned, it's different in the way of what I have learned in terms of Indigenous knowledge, how we will always be learning until and after our journey to the spirit world. We never had a timeline fit for what success was meant to be, because we understood that we would always be obtaining success until and after the journey to the spirit world. So how can we fit into institutions that were not built for the benefit of our people? Educational institutions, whether it be elementary school, high school, post-secondary college, and university, these spaces were not built with our people in mind. They were built for people who are not our own. They were built for settlers.



**Kirsten Dumont [00:23:51]:**

So how do you thrive and strive within institutions and spaces that don't put inclusion first, where you don't hear people of your own talking about the same lived experiences that you have the same troubles that you go through? That within itself is a systemic barrier that was created long before we had a decision on where we were going to go to school or not. It's hard to think about putting yourself back into a box because we were never created to fit these boxes. These boxes were not meant for us. We are outside of the box. So how do you be a part of something that was not built for you to be a part of? I think that that's why conversations like these are so important, because although these institutions were not built with our people in mind, these kinds of discussions can help restructure these kinds of institutions so that we are included, and we are a part of something that can help generations and generations to come.

**Stephen Hurley [00:25:06]:**

I'm going to go back to Kiera's class, and I'm not sure who wants to weigh in there. And then over to Stephanie.

**Marissa Magneson [00:25:11]:**

It's Marissa here with Kiera's class. I'll weigh in more on the cultural barrier of voice. And I'm thinking again, coming from my own lived experience, and particularly my experience during my master's degree, there was a denial of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, as previously mentioned, but also a denial of me as an artist. So, I came from a fine arts background, Bachelor of Fine Arts in music, and then moving to a master's of Indigenous Studies. And I felt like my voice as an artist was completely stripped away from me. And because art was my way of voicing myself and who I am, I no longer had anything to express myself. Words were not enough, but even then, I didn't even have the words. And I think specifically to two different examples.

**Marissa Magneson [00:26:07]:**

One was in a literature course. I don't have a background in English literature, but I do have a background in photography. And the course was fusing the two ideas together. And I reached out to the professor beforehand, explaining that I have a background as a professional photographer and was wondering if this course would support artistic creation, because that's kind of the angle that I wanted to approach it with. And they said, absolutely, you're more than welcome to take the final assignment in a creative approach. And then once I was in the course, it was my first presentation in the seminar, and I shared some of my own photographic work in response to some of the literature that we are reading and the theories that we are engaging with. And the professor felt quite uncomfortable that I did this. They expressed to me that they weren't sure how to mark me in this course because I work as a professional photographer.

**Marissa Magneson [00:27:03]:**

And I was taken aback by this because I was in a situation where I was commuting long distances to work my photography job, to pay my rent and put food on my table, and yet I

couldn't bring that to the classroom. And I ended up dropping the course because I didn't have a way to continue mobilizing myself without photography. And I thought that was insane in a photography course too. In another instance, a different course, I had a professor tell me that you're not an academic, Marissa. You're an artist. And I was shocked by this because I couldn't understand why the two had to be separate, why you cannot be an artist and an academic. And these were things that I was very stuck with. I didn't know how to move through the rest of my coursework.

**Marissa Magneson [00:27:55]:**

And so, I took time away from school. I actually took time to go work in the arts and culture scene here in Toronto and find my voice again. And it was only because an Indigenous professor who was outside of the institution I was studying in had accepted and embraced me and allowed me to create in whatever artistic or non-artistic medium I needed to, that I could then come back and do the work. And I think it's important when we think about barriers, that we think about cultural, linguistic, how different people express themselves in different ways. And all of those should be valued as knowledge sharing, that there shouldn't be one unified way to submit an essay for a course or to submit a master's research paper or thesis. And at the end of the day, mine was, quote unquote, unconventional, but it was what I needed to share my voice. And I think that that's really something that a lot of institutions need to reflect on, is how are they excluding certain perspectives simply in the way that they're assigning coursework and creating these degrees?

**Stephen Hurley [00:29:15]:**

Marissa, you have me thinking about the need in our cultures, in our societies, for artists that are willing to push back against entrenched thinking, not only in processes and products, but in what those processes and products express. How much of that pushback that you received had to do with the methods of artistic expression you were using and how much had to do with the message that you were trying to communicate, do you think?

**Marissa Magneson [00:29:50]:**

I think at the time, it was entirely a pushback on the artistic avenues I wanted to pursue. But because of what happened and how it happened, my response ended up being a critique of the institutions through art, because I felt that it was important to have those conversations, and I was very upset by what had happened. But initially, there was no pushback on anything else except for, well, I'm an artist, and this is how I talk. And instead being told, no, just use words.

**Stephen Hurley [00:30:30]:**

Is it okay for an academic to be an artist now, in your mind, it obviously wasn't.

**Marissa Magneson [00:30:35]:**

Oh, 1000%. Yeah.

**Marissa Magneson [00:30:37]:**

I presented my final research, which was the response, essentially, to what had been happening at the Indigenous Literary Studies association in Saskatoon a couple years ago. And in sharing that work with other academics, scholars, professors, graduate students, was very much validated that this artistic work was also academic work, that they go hand in hand. And I was so uplifted to also see, similarly, someone who did not see themselves as an academic be validated that they are, in fact, someone who belongs within that community. And their work was on language revitalization. So, they also felt cast to the side. And I think it's important to ensure that there's space for, again, different ways of expression.

**Stephen Hurley [00:31:33]:**

Stephanie, let's go to you, your insights.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:31:38]:**

Okay, so I've been taking notes on all of what everyone's saying, just so that I can remember all the things I was thinking. So, I'm going to start with, I guess, pushback and that idea. So, I work in the elementary school system and in the very colonial structured system, and things always are the way they are because they've always been that way. At some point someone decided that that's how it was going to be. And the issue that we're constantly running into in the Indigenous education department is it's those rules, those rules that were written by someone at some point. And there is a lack of commitment to creating space where those rules don't have to be the only way to do things. And when you're bringing Indigenous education into the school system, they directly conflict with the way things are supposed to be in the education system. So we're constantly dealing with that pushback.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:32:37]:**

We provide resources, we provide professional development, we provide all of these things for educators to understand how community, the Indigenous community is asking for Indigenous education and perspectives to be brought into the classroom. But then the system doesn't allow for the freedom or the space for educators to do that. So we have all of these beautiful ideas, but then there's the fear, oh, well, now we won't get the curriculum expectations met accordingly, or there are particular union agreements that happen so that certain people can't be placed in different employment positions to create a better space for that. So it's constantly, it feels like you take one step forward and then you think, I feel like we're making progress and we're making great strides, and then you're getting pushback. Pushback. There's the resistance and a lot of fear from non-Indigenous educators and bringing in Indigenous practices and ways of knowing into their classroom. And the system isn't budging. They're just going to keep doing it the way they're doing it unless we demand that change.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:33:48]:**

And that fight is exhausting every day because you can see how important it is for Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous ways of knowing to be brought into the classroom every day. I see it every day with a lot of really great teachers that I do a lot of great work with. And you can see the beauty and the wonder and the respect that children are developing for the land and the history of Canada and Indigenous people. But then the system itself isn't creating an opportunity for that to be sustainable. So we need to be going higher up and dealing higher up. But then at the same time, as educators, like as a leading learning partner, I'm not the one who has a seat at that table, it's the people above me. So then we're constantly looking above us and our department to say, okay, who can be sitting at this table fighting this fight for us? Who is the person who's going to be sitting there? And it's hard because it's like you're constantly having to convince everybody in the room that this is something, that this is a change that needs to happen for the better of Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children in the schooling system. So I find it's just a systematic barrier that I'm facing every day trying to do this work, and it can be discouraging at times, but I just wanted to bring that into this space.

**Stephen Hurley [00:35:14]:**

Would you say that in those daily fight, those daily fights against the barriers that seem so strong, it's almost like for every action, there's an opposite and equal reaction. Are you more hopeful or more discouraged on most days?

**Stephanie Sanders [00:35:33]:**

More hopeful on most days, it depends on the day, honestly. But when I'm in the classroom with the kids and there are educators who have been doing the right PD, who have been really unlearning the colonial system that they're a part of and really doing the work to create safe spaces, then we have the opportunity to bring the Indigenous community partners that we've been working so close with into the classroom and to see the relationships that develop and the learning that happens and the community that's built. It's a really beautiful and empowering thing. So it makes it...if we need to keep fighting that fight, then we're going to keep fighting it forever, because that's what makes it worth it every day to see how amazing educators can do when they are supported and they have the right learning tools and they have the confidence and the respect to be inviting community into their classroom. It really is so beautiful. So most of the time, it is a positive experience, but every once in a while, it just goes, now we have to do this all over again.

**Stephen Hurley [00:36:47]:**

I think we have one more voice that we want to make space for here. Melissa, your thoughts on barriers?

**Melissa Somer [00:36:57]:**

With regards to barriers, I could go really deep and probably take up all the time on this podcast, but I can definitely say for my own personal, historical piece, when it comes to just an individual level, I grew up in a single parent household and lived in the far west end

of Etobicoke before amalgamation, and I had opportunity to attend First Nation school, but because they had no busing, that was a structural, systemic issue. Living in a single parent household, we couldn't move. So another structural issue. There was no community that I could connect to. Again, another barrier to me developing relationships. And then when you look at the system itself, it was designed not for the success of original inhabitant. It was designed for our newest settler students. You look at the way funding is even today, we have classrooms where there's busing and meal provision and clothing drives for students that are coming from these war torn countries, and yet we still have Indigenous students living here in the city, living almost the exact same kind of traumas, where they're experiencing violence, they're experiencing poverty, they're experiencing all kinds of different issues that are severely impacting their holistic well-being.

**Melissa Somer [00:38:42]:**

But the system isn't set up for their success. It's set up for newer, newcomer success. And that for me, as an educator, after spending 15 years facilitating full day kindergarten, I've seen how it works. And now working in private schools and for nonprofit organizations, I still see that same kind of agenda happening when it comes to funding as well. There's money provided to nonprofit, but if you're for profit, you've got different access. You don't have to write the same kind of proposals, you don't have to have the same kind of specialized language. And then when it comes to the idea of reconciliation today, there is no real reconciliation. Within my mind, it's just a new political hot button word that helps politicians pull in a new group of voting so that they can continue to appropriate a lot of the trauma that we've all experienced.

**Melissa Somer [00:39:47]:**

And you see it in the way that different corporations were selling their orange shirts or marketing this new campaign, that they're promising certain percentages of their funding to go towards these things. But really, their funding really needs to be going towards these healing centers and getting the appropriate therapies and counsellings provided so that these students can have the appropriate resources to come into a classroom and feel healthy and well when they come in and they're engaging in their classrooms and knowing that, we know there's no such thing as a safe space, but we need an inclusive space where our voices are being honored and they're given undivided attention. Our biggest concern right now is the indifference and desensitization that's occurring with the way that classroom structures are and overpopulation and no support for a lot of the really high needs that aren't being supported through our government. So, when they keep cutting all this funding and saying they're reallocating it, they need to really be giving it back to the communities that need it the most. And that's our youth.

**Stephen Hurley [00:41:07]:**

Well, thank you all for such honest and courageous responses. I wanted to spend the remaining time that we have talking about some of the professional learning and unlearning that's going on and what you have witnessed. We know that teachers, classroom teachers, consultants in districts, educators in general, are really at the heart of this change, and we

know that there is a lot of work being done. I wanted to give you an opportunity to highlight some of the promising professional learning and unlearning work that you're seeing, or maybe you have some ideas on areas of professional learning that we need to address and in fact, embrace. So, I wanted to, well, someone from Kiera's. I just see one hand, so go ahead.

**Marissa Magneson [00:42:02]:**

That's Marissa again.

**Stephen Hurley [00:42:03]:**

I was going to call on you. Marissa. Go ahead.

**Marissa Magneson [00:42:07]:**

So, one thing that comes top of mind for me in regards to learning and unlearning, and specifically coming from my position, coming in as a guest educator. Right. So I'm not working with these students every single day. They might see me only for a day. They might see me for multiple days. It depends on the arrangement between myself and the school, but something that makes a massive difference is when their main teacher does the work to prepare them to approach me properly. And I'll give you a few questions that have come my way that are quite inappropriate. One question was, are you related to Pocahontas? Another question was, do you live in a teepee? And the third question that comes to mind is, what do you eat? Expecting that I would eat any different than the rest of them.

**Marissa Magneson [00:43:04]:**

And these questions come from stereotypes that they find in the media and things that they have encountered in their lives. And I have to challenge us all in a single moment. I only have a very small amount of time with these students, and I don't necessarily want to spend our entire time unpacking these inappropriate questions. And so there are things that their main educator can do, such as even pre-introducing, who are the Métis? Who are Indigenous people? There are Indigenous people that are urban Indigenous people. There are Indigenous people that live on reserves. What are reserves? How did that come to be? And giving that context so that students are equipped to not necessarily bring that directly to me, not saying that it still won't happen, because it will, but I have noticed the teachers that take the time to prepare their students and to remind their students what is a good way of asking a question and what might be a way that they need to pause before they bring that to the surface, that there is a difference. And for myself, when those kinds of things do come up, I think it's really important for me to pause sometimes. I don't always have the answer right away because I'm thinking, okay, what about age and stage? How do I unpack this for someone who's twelve versus someone who is 48, for example? It's a very different conversation.

**Marissa Magneson [00:44:44]:**

Right. And so sometimes I don't have the perfect answer to give them right away, and that can be really challenging. But there's certainly a benefit to doing some preliminary work before inviting an Indigenous educator into your classroom.

**Stephen Hurley [00:45:00]:**

Thank you for that. Stephanie, over to you.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:45:04]:**

I agree with that statement. I spend a lot of time in and out of the schools, and you can really tell the difference between the staff who have spent the time doing the learning, understanding what language to be using, and ways to be greeting and welcoming community partners into the classroom and stuff like that. One thing I do notice a lot in the schools, so as a board, we're part of the framework, is that every school should be doing the land acknowledgment on the announcements in the morning. And then we noticed that that very quickly lost its impact. So we've been working on developing a land acknowledgment writing workshop where each student is writing their own land acknowledgment. And as a classroom, the educators are to be unpacking each part of the land acknowledgment and then focusing on the action piece. Like it's one thing to acknowledge, but what are we going to do about it? Idea. So a lot of times I'm in the schools providing that support, and when I ask students what they know about Indigenous people, their answers are all very similar, like the first people to live on Canada.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:46:11]:**

And it's a lot of history related, it's a lot of reference to people from the past. And I'm finding that there is a lack of ability for educators to bring Indigenous people into the present day and to be celebrating and incorporating and teaching about contemporary Indigenous people all over Canada. And I find very often it is something as referred to in the past. So, what I see there is a need to be focusing on and acknowledging the history, but not letting that be how one defines Indigenous people, because that is not our story. That is a story of colonization, that does not celebrate the beauty and brilliance of Indigenous culture. And so as a board, we're trying to shift away from that. We're trying to make sure that students understand and know the history, because that's really important. But to be focusing on the positive and ways to empower and celebrate Indigenous culture to make sure that students know when there's an Indigenous person in their schools or when they meet Indigenous people, that they know the importance of being respectful and what questions are appropriate to be asking, and that they're not only hearing one stereotype and one story in their space.

**Stephanie Sanders [00:47:35]:**

So that is something that I think is really important that we need to be focusing on as educators.

**Stephen Hurley [00:47:40]:**

Thank you. Kirsten, I wanted to move to you. You have a lot of experience in various forms of professional learning, unlearning what is capturing your imagination these days.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:47:52]:**

Thank you so much. I completely agree with Stephanie and Marissa, and I was actually just thinking about how when I'm invited into whether it's classrooms, schools, organizations, I always pose the person reaching out to me with three questions. These three questions are, one, why are you requesting this specific topic or teaching? This helps me to understand if they've done prior learning before reaching out to me. Two, what has your class already learned? This also validates whether or not I am being put into an environment that has done no learning whatsoever. And then three, why are you requesting that I specifically come in? Within urban cities, a lot of the times there can be people who decide to create indigeneity and categorize it as pan Indigenous thinking that one culture is the same, one nation is the same, one community is the same. So when asking why they specifically want me to come in, I want to understand if it is because of the nation that I come from or the knowledge that I hold.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:49:13]:**

If it is something that they're requesting a teaching from the Northwest Territories or a place that my family and I are not from, then I would suggest somebody from that community. Sometimes there can be a lot of misconception and simply ignorance to knowing and not knowing what is and isn't when requesting somebody to come into your space. That's why I think that the work that Stephanie and all of her colleagues do is absolutely incredible. I've been approached by so many educators who know exactly how to respond to these questions because they've already done the learning. One thing that I really admire that her and her team actually puts together is something called a Reconciliation Collaborative Inquiry. It's where a group of educators can come together after hours to consult with and learn from Indigenous educators, myself included.

**Kirsten Dumont [00:50:16]:**

From this has sparked many different projects in classrooms and entire schools that amplify Indigenous history, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous brilliance, and Indigenous beauty. The ability to unlearn, and the beauty that that can bring is infinite. I think that, yes, it stems from understanding how to coincide and conversate with people who are not your own, but also understanding that Indigenous culture is so much more than what can be understood in a textbook or simply found online. It's understanding that these different communities, these different lifestyles, these different experiences all come to help us understand how we can be unified in a society filled with beauty and inclusion.

**Stephen Hurley [00:51:22]:**

And you can't get that in a webinar an hour.



**Kirsten Dumont [00:51:26]**

Exactly.

**Stephen Hurley [00:51:28]**

Right. I wanted to go back to Kiera's class, and, Melissa, you had some thoughts on professional learning and unlearning?

**Melissa Somer [00:51:38]:**

Absolutely. I think one of the biggest things I have for professional learning is definitely unpacking privilege and your positionality to whiteness. Because if you don't have a reflexive approach where you really engage in deeply reviewing your own belief systems and your own learning, you're not able to provide an enriching environment for anyone that you're engaging with. Because when you speak, you're speaking in a language and with specific wording that very much articulates where you come from, where your understandings are, what kind of positionality that you're coming with. So when it comes to doing something like that, I usually in my classroom, have this amazing video I've found on YouTube called The Privilege Race. And it's a foot race with students where every student is asked a series of questions and they're invited to take one step forward. And at the end of all these questions, the students are asked to reflect back and look at how those advantages have taken them that much further ahead than those who were set up in spaces with unacknowledged barriers. So, for example, do you come from a nuclear home? Do you have food for lunch every single day? Are you coming from a background where you have a family that's provided post-secondary education? There's so many different factors that come into play when it comes to understanding how much your lived experiences impact what your future can lay forward for you and how many different kinds of issues you're going to experience when you're going forward.

**Stephen Hurley [00:53:50]:**

Okay, well, I'm going to go around the panel and ask if there are any final comments that you have on anything you've heard from each other, anything that you want to communicate to our audience. I have a feeling that I would like. I'm going to be reaching out to each of you for a separate conversation because this has been so rich for me. But just to give you a chance to weigh in in our last moments together, back to Kiera's room.

**Marissa Magneson [00:54:22]:**

I'll jump in here just for a final kind of closing reflection. I think a lot of the questions have surfaced, a lot of the challenges that Indigenous educators face, and I just want to bring it back to something that I am constantly thinking about, which is intergenerational healing. We talk about intergenerational trauma a lot, and there's a heavy focus on that, especially within education, and that kind of gets placed upon us to unpack our trauma constantly. But that can be a lot to ask, and sometimes it's too much. And so, what I've been thinking about with the work I'm doing is how can I, not move away from it, but move a focus more towards the beauty of our very diverse cultures? What can I highlight within my own experience that leaves folks in a more positive light regarding Indigenous people? If all they

learn about regarding Indigenous people is trauma, then I have seen how some students, even at a young age, give up and they're like, there's no hope, but there is hope and there is beauty, and there is so much that can be unpackaged within intergenerational healing. I think about cultural reclamation, about language revitalization. Yes, those have dark roots in trauma, but there is a beautiful future for the future generations.

**Stephen Hurley [00:55:50]:**

Thank you for that. And Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, you've been sitting here patiently waiting and listening and moderating on the side. Some comments from you, on what you've heard tonight?

**Nicholas Ng-A-Fook [00:56:03]:**

Well, first I want to thank each and every one of you who participated and stepped forward to offer your teachings to not only who's here with us tonight, but those that extend beyond who will listen to this hopefully one day and in terms of the circles that will be out there. And also want to thank Kiera's, the students who have been. Yeah, I just, I think for me, even the questions are problematic in terms of the symposium that we're coming together, and you've all addressed how the concept of the questions are problematic in themselves. So even thinking about equity in relation to Ontario and the elementary schooling system, how equity and the discourse of equity, often not only in school boards, K to twelve schooling, but also in higher education, really flattens the conversation and tries to understand it through a certain perspective, which is very troubling. And just in terms of that beautiful closure, in terms of what you shared, is that I really think I'm talking about myself now as a first generation settler immigrant to Canada, working in teacher education and working in research and grad studies, is that it's one thing to ask outside for non-Indigenous students, and there's a certain pedagogical "thing" that we want to take up and I say "thing" and I'm putting that in quotation marks curriculum content. But it's a much different conversation when we have First Nation Métis and Inuit children in the classroom. And I think one of the hard things to understand in terms of professional learning in teacher education, when we have predominantly students from non-Indigenous backgrounds, is that we still think of that framework when we're asking questions around equity as opposed to thinking about the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children or our colleagues that are sitting in the room. So for me, that is the biggest unlearning and learning that I continue to struggle with, is when we come together and sit in circle, or when we come together and have this kind of conversation, how do we frame questions in a way that bring us all together to recognize the intergenerational healing, the intergenerational strength that you all bring, without taking away of our own focus on trying to heal ourselves first before doing that other important work of listening, hearing, empathizing, and the difficult work of trying to change the way in which we do things within the K to twelve or higher education system.

**Nicholas Ng-A-Fook [00:58:50]:**

So I think there's a lot of work to be done there. So I just wanted to thank everyone for sharing tonight. For me, it's so hopeful to see that you're doing that important work. And I think the work that we have to do at the symposium that are working in these institutions is

to keep banging on the walls to create more space and room and tearing them down in some instances. Stephen, I've talked about this before. For me, I think the public schooling system in higher ed, what we're talking about right now is changing the wallpaper, but not actually changing the structures of settler colonialism within it.

**Stephen Hurley [00:59:27]:**

I wanted to thank all of our guests today, and Kiera's entire class for being with us and making space for this conversation. Thank you so much.

**Stephen Hurley [00:59:40]:**

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