

## **EP 18 Affirming and Centering Two-spirit, Indigiqueer Black, Racialized 2SLGBTQQA+ Persons with Multiple Intersecting Identities in K-12**

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:00]:

Today's topic may be challenging for different reasons, and while it is not our intent to cause anxiety or stress to anyone participating or listening, we acknowledge this may be the experience for some people. If needed, we encourage you to reach out for support to a trusted friend or colleague, another personal resource, or your organisation's Employee Assistance Program.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:12]:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC,

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:21]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:26]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:44]:

We hope that Leadership Talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy, and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:00]:

Well, it's good to be back with you again, Susie, for what I know will be another great conversation. Today we're going to be talking with Jordan Applebaum and Robert Durocher from the Toronto District School Board, who I think are going to have some really interesting things to

share with us around establishing and growing GSA groups in their schools and some of the work that they've been doing towards that.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:23]:

Jordan and Robert, it's great to have you with us. We're excited to have this conversation with you today. Such an important topic. But before we go there, we wanted to give you an opportunity to sort of introduce yourselves and share a little bit about how you came to be with us today. I know there's a lot to share, so maybe a couple of highlights each would be great.

Robert Durocher [00:01:43]:

Thanks Susie and Lawrence for inviting us in.

Robert Durocher [00:01:45]:

This is Robert Durocher. I'm Métis on my dad's side, and French. I am Gay, Queer and IndigiQueer and currently I'm a centrally assigned vice principal with the Urban Indigenous Education Centre.

Robert Durocher [00:01:57]:

And what's brought me here, this journey is thinking back when I first started teaching and I wasn't out to anybody because of homophobic and transphobic fear. And as I continued my leadership as a teacher, teacher in the classroom, teaching at York University as a learning coach, I realised the importance of being out there. So other Queer kids and other Queer staff see that there are other people out there not as a hero, but just as a friend, colleague in support. And so this is important work that

Robert Durocher [00:02:38]:

I do alongside Jordan and other colleagues at TDSB.

Robert Durocher [00:02:41]:

And so it's just a pleasure to be here. Jordan?

Jordan Applebaum [00:02:45]:

Thanks, Robert.

Jordan Applebaum [00:02:46]:

Thank you all for having us today.

Jordan Applebaum [00:02:48]:

Just like Robert, very important work to do. I'm a proud Trans guy and Queer guy with TDSB.

Jordan Applebaum [00:02:54]:

My name's Jordan Applebaum.

Jordan Applebaum [00:02:55]:

I go by he/him pronouns. I've been teaching with TDSB for a long time.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:00]:  
Also work with Egale doing workshops.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:02]:  
On how to support Two-spirit LGBTQ.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:04]:  
And with ETFO, creating a Two-spirit LGBTQ resource site.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:09]:  
And I'm now vice principal with TDSB. When I was growing up, we didn't really know the word Trans. There was a lot of transphobia and homophobia.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:18]:  
And so, just like Robert, I do this work because it's very important for other people to have role models to.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:24]:  
Look up to and speak to and see themselves, for both students and staff to see themselves represented and just support all the amazing students and staff who are out there. So that's why we have the TDSB GSA Network and do the EnVision Conference every year, which we'll be talking about.

Jordan Applebaum [00:03:43]:  
And all the amazing work that I do with Robert and my amazing colleagues at TDSB.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:03:48]:  
Okay, well, thank you both for getting us started and sharing a little bit about your personal experience.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:53]:  
Yeah, I think there's a lot for us to dig into there. So I know that you mentioned that together you're supporting your colleagues to create more inclusive spaces in schools, especially through establishing and growing GSA Network within the Toronto District School Board. And I know through some other efforts that you've been involved in, like the envision conference, you're really supporting this work throughout your district. So I don't know who wants to start, but maybe you could jump in and just start, you know, sharing with us some of the work that you've been doing through the network and through the conference to support your colleagues.

Robert Durocher [00:04:28]:

I know when we really all came together, Jordan and Jamea Zuberi, who also was a vice principal at the time, is that we actually came together during COVID lockdown to make sure that we had a virtual GSA site to support the teachers that were doing the work for

Robert Durocher [00:04:48]:

Their local sites and in their schools virtually and then that continued.

Robert Durocher [00:04:52]:

And Jordan and I have continued to support teachers in their schools, as well as other administrators on how to start up a GSA. Building the momentum, sustainability. I know Jordan and I are always sending things back and forth...

Robert Durocher [00:05:07]:

Hey, here's some great resources for GSAs and classrooms.

Robert Durocher [00:05:12]:

And so it's about collaboration, and I think one of the beautiful things about this is being able to collaborate with a colleague and modelling that for other

Robert Durocher [00:05:21]:

Schools as a way to operate. And then with the EnVision Conference is I actually started working with the envision conference as a teacher, and I was doing, like, teacher and teacher workshops on how to engage in conversations around 2SLGBTQ peoples and identities, and doing so with care and love and joy.

Robert Durocher [00:05:46]:

So that we don't continue harm.

Robert Durocher [00:05:48]:

And I think, I'm going to speak for Jordan just a bit, but I know a lot of the work we do is to make

Robert Durocher [00:05:53]:

Sure kids are in braver, safer spaces and Queer kids, trans kids to us kids, however people wish to identify. But we really make sure that we're focusing on the joy and the beauty, creativity and brilliance of Queer students and Queer educators, Queer families, Queer communities, so that it is focused on joyful moments and how to create spaces when they aren't so joyful and for students to be able to come and share that.

Jordan Applebaum [00:06:22]:

I love how Robert started with the beginning and the roots of where the GSA Network started, with Jamea and many

Jordan Applebaum [00:06:28]:

Others who started this great work and the importance of joy. And there's a great saying that if we fill them with joy, it will be easier for them to deal with the hard stuff.

Jordan Applebaum [00:06:39]:

Some of those conversations that they have in GSA's, they can have those hard difficult conversations about any kind of homophobia.

Jordan Applebaum [00:06:47]:

Or transphobia or discrimination they're experiencing. But then they can also talk about joy. They can celebrate music, art activities, and if they have a community where they feel comfortable to share with each other, and then they can both talk about the hard stuff and celebrate who they are.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:04]:

And so that importance of belonging for well being and achievement in schools.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:08]:

And there's so many incredible things I'd love, Robert, for you to also talk.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:12]:

About the Two-spirit IndigiQueer Conference that you started and all the amazing work that you do there with the Urban Indigenous Education Centre, because I'm sure other school boards would love to have something like this at theirs, and it might give them some ideas of what they can do.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:27]:

And we also do lots of incredible work with the GSA's, some of which started with secondary, and then we revised it for elementary, for younger students like pen pals, where they can have a literacy approach, writing to each other with other students at other schools who might have similar interests or similar intersecting identities.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:49]:

There's also the EnVision Conference, which every year, like Robert, I started off as a presenter at EnVision, and then I was asked to join the steering committee.

Jordan Applebaum [00:07:59]:

And it's really incredible seeing this conference come together every year and having community come and present. And there's workshops from community members, from staff who are TDSB, but also even students now get involved and they present.

Jordan Applebaum [00:08:13]:

Because they have such a wealth of knowledge, and it's really incredible to see them get up there and lead the conference.

Jordan Applebaum [00:08:20]:

So our theme this year is Queer Futurisms, centering Trans kids, affirming the intersecting identities of Indigenous, Black, racialized and marginalised, Two-spirit LGBTQ+ communities.

Jordan Applebaum [00:08:31]:

And it's really incredible. Over a thousand students join us in person.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:08:35]:

I think what's really powerful in what you've shared so far is just the importance of the network that obviously you've created and developed over many years, and knowing that there is a community of support. Both of these conferences, obviously you've been doing this for a while. What are some of the steps that if a district or a principal in a particular school wants to get started with something like, do you have some pointers and some easy steps to take? Because it's, I guess you can start small and build as you go.

Jordan Applebaum [00:09:06]:

Yeah, I'd say that's usually the best way to go find out what staff are interested in helping out.

Jordan Applebaum [00:09:12]:

And a lot of this is volunteer-based,

Jordan Applebaum [00:09:14]:

but you can also get grants and hire people. And if you use your equity people wisely as well, then that might be a good way to start off your conference. And just involve your community members to come and be presenters and find out as well what parents and staff would want to be presenters. Put out a form there for talent and see what's out there. And then it just grows. Every year it gets bigger.

Robert Durocher [00:09:41]:

I would add to that, too, is it's really important to know who your allies are and who will support you in the work, because that is a very important step that it just can't be yourself.

Robert Durocher [00:09:53]:

You have to have some allies that are going to engage in that work with you.

Robert Durocher [00:09:57]:

And I think, you know, as I want to talk about this, and you're starting things up, is, you know, there's been pushback in the last few years around doing work around Trans identities, Queer identities, Gay identities, and particularly last year, we noticed that there are some pushback around drag queens in schools.

Robert Durocher [00:10:15]:

And so when I say knowing your allies, that was important because we needed to have allies in that conversation so that we can continue to do the work like envisioned, continue to do the supporting of the GSA's on both the local and the whole boardwide level.

Robert Durocher [00:10:31]:

And then I'm just going to touch on something that Jordan talked about earlier, and that's the Two-spirit Indigiqueer pride. So four years ago at the Urban Indigenous Education Center, I worked with a small team to have the first ever Two-spirit Indigiqueer pride centred Two-spirit Indigiqueer identities.

Robert Durocher [00:10:52]:

So we had artists doing talks, we had an elder that opened it up.

Robert Durocher [00:10:57]:

It was quite beautiful, and a lot of people came. And through that, members of our team that work across TDSB were able to make relationships with students who identified as Two-spirit Indigiqueer to also come and inform the work that we do.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:13]:

So when you're supporting the development, let's say you're working with your colleagues in individual schools who are thinking about or have already started down the road of establishing a GSA group.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:26]:

Where are some of the challenges? Like, what do they need most when they're starting out? I know you mentioned allies, and I think that's probably a really important component, but what are the other things that they're struggling with to get these clubs up off the ground and to start them in a good way?

Jordan Applebaum [00:11:42]:

I think part of it is knowing what policies are out there to support GSA's and really knowing that the Education Act there supports schools to start gsas and human rights, and so that if they do get any pushback, they know where to quote and they can quote these policies that everyone has the right to their human rights for self identity.

Jordan Applebaum [00:12:04]:

Just really, really understanding the importance of increasing student voice and centering Indigenous, Black, racialized, Two-spirit LGBTQ students with intersecting identities and that they can support students through these ongoing discussions and meetings.

Jordan Applebaum [00:12:20]:

It's really important for leaders and staff to know, and administrators to know that if you're not creating these spaces, it actually creates a poison environment.

Jordan Applebaum [00:12:29]:

And the importance of having a GSA at your school, a BSA at your school, and having these affinity groups and then having them work together so that students feel really involved, so that you can build capacity in student leadership, and you can have school assemblies, guest speakers, announcements, presentations, consent workshops, and all these initiatives to help students really have a voice and feel part of their school, if you notice that there's a lot of students who are looking like they're disengaged or they're shy or they're acting out, usually there's a reason for that.

Jordan Applebaum [00:13:01]:

And a lot of the reasons are because they don't feel like they're involved in their school. They don't feel like they belong at their school. And some of the assumptions that administrators or staff make is that, well, we don't see any Two-spirit LGBTQ students in our school, so we don't have any. But we really have to be mindful of the fact that we exist in all spaces and in all classrooms and that if students aren't coming out and they're not being themselves, it's because they don't feel comfortable to.

Jordan Applebaum [00:13:30]:

And so we need to make sure that students do feel comfortable to be themselves and that our staff feel comfortable to be themselves. So the goal is basically to provide a safe, supportive environment for students of diverse genders and sexualities to meet and to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity issues and form a community.

Jordan Applebaum [00:13:50]:

And we do that to ensure that our board meets its commitments to equity.

Jordan Applebaum [00:13:55]:

And inclusion and student success.

Robert Durocher [00:13:58]:

And I would add human rights to that as well.

Robert Durocher [00:14:00]:

Jordan, I think that's really important to add that it's a human rights thing, too, definitely.

Robert Durocher [00:14:06]:

And just on some of the practical things, too, like, starting up a GSA.

Robert Durocher [00:14:10]:

Is like, people email us, and sometimes it's just a list of resources, some activities that help people to have a sense to build their capacity and be like, yeah, I can do this.

Robert Durocher [00:14:24]:



It's definitely the equity, human rights, student voice, creating conditions in schools where student voice comes out, where students gender, sexual diversity feel included, and a real sense of belonging, not a fake one.

Robert Durocher [00:14:43]:

And just supporting our colleagues and doing that is a really important thing to do. And I think both on, like, the theoretical level, but also on the practical level as well.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:14:55]:

Just one of the things I'm thinking about as you're talking, and I think it's really powerful to have both you, Jordan and Robert, just speaking about this in such an open way. Not everyone is there. And I think about the affirmation of students, the affirmation of who they are, how they choose to identify is so important. And is there any one sort of impactful sharing of the impact that your work has had on students? I think that's really important for our listeners to hear, too, because, you're right, the space is needed and there aren't enough. I think our legal responsibility, but also the moral imperative to do this work is really important.

Jordan Applebaum [00:15:34]:

Yeah, you can definitely see the impact in students.

Jordan Applebaum [00:15:37]:

Like, I've had students where I thought they were shy, and then they joined the GSA and they were jumping down the hall. They're, like, more engaged in classes. They're excited, they're speaking out, and they're very lively. And before they were quiet, they were sitting in the corner. They weren't talking to anyone.

Jordan Applebaum [00:15:55]:

You can just see the shift in students when they feel valued, when they feel seen and heard.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:02]:

And just knowing that 64% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe and that the average is 500 Canadian youth ages ten to 24 die by suicide each year.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:14]:

And that trans youth are at greatest risk of committing suicide, with Trans women of color being the most targeted victims of violence.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:22]:

These are our most vulnerable students, and it's really important to support them and make sure that they do feel seen and heard and that we challenge some of the myths that are out there.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:34]:

Some people who are intersex feel like they're part of the Two-spirit LGBTQ community, and other people feel it's more of a medical thing.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:41]:

But when we're talking about intersex people, they make up about 2% of the world population. And if you think about the world population, it's huge.

Jordan Applebaum [00:16:48]:

So this is millions of people we're talking about. So we want to make sure that our schools have all-gender washrooms, that they, that they feel inclusive for everyone, not just the majority. And I guess you can do that in many different ways, and every GSA is different. You'll have some students who they want to, in their GSA, they just want to play games. They might want to make a GSA trivia game.

Jordan Applebaum [00:17:13]:

They might want to do Scratch, like a coding game, things like that. Others might want to talk about disability awareness. They might want to do more leadership type roles like announcements and making positive library displays and making sure that the books are very inclusive. And some of them, they want to take on more of an activist stance and really change things at their school.

Jordan Applebaum [00:17:38]:

Or in their communities.

Jordan Applebaum [00:17:40]:

And so it really depends on who the students are in your GSA. Some staff, they just need ideas of what can we do in our GSA?

Jordan Applebaum [00:17:47]:

And it could be as simple as saying, okay, well, first week, why don't you create a playlist of Queer musicians? The next week, maybe you look at some art by Queer musicians, by Two-spirit LGBTQ musicians. And one thing that just came up recently, I'm using that word Queer. And I just want to point out that, yes, it originally was a derogatory term, which came from Lewis Carroll's "Through The Looking Glass", and in society, it was used as a derogatory term.

Jordan Applebaum [00:18:14]:

But the Queer community has really taken that word back as a positive word. And for me, because I'm Trans, it talks about both my gender and my sexuality.

Jordan Applebaum [00:18:24]:

And so I like that word Queer.

Jordan Applebaum [00:18:26]:

And a lot of people have taken that word back. But I just want to be mindful that not everybody in the Queer community likes that word and steers away from it so that people are aware of the history behind that word.

Robert Durocher [00:18:39]:

I'm thinking about the impact and so to that I'll speak to quickly. And one impact that I really noticed, was when the Two-spirit Indigiqueer pride was started the second year, having an Indigenous student trustee organise and lead and sort of be the host of all the talks, supported other Indigenous youth to actually see themselves represented. And the following year, the Indigenous student trustee is a Two-spirit person,

Robert Durocher [00:19:15]:

But, the impact for me is the fact that more students were willing to engage. the conversations and felt represented.

Robert Durocher [00:19:23]:

And another impact is at the EnVision Conference when you see all the beautiful students coming out and having a laugh.

Robert Durocher [00:19:34]:

And being able to just be themselves.

Robert Durocher [00:19:37]:

With other LGBTQ+ 2S students and allies. It is a really beautiful moment, and that impact probably has a lasting effect on them for quite a long time.

Jordan Applebaum [00:19:50]:

Yeah, we didn't have a conference like this when I was young, and I imagine that would have impacted the rest of my life if I was able to see so many other students who identified in a similar way come together with staff as well.

Jordan Applebaum [00:20:04]:

And having these role models of people who are my age, younger and older to be in community with and share, share a beauty of who you are, especially with all the hard things that are out there and happening in Saskatchewan, Alberta and around the world. Like Robert said, it's such a beautiful thing seeing all these students and staff come together and really celebrate who they are and the intersecting parts of their identity.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:36]:

Thanks for that. Thank you to you both. Actually, I know that we could probably spend lots more time continuing to talk about the many ways that you're supporting students, but I do want to thank you both for being here today to share with us some of the work that you're doing and some really practical strategies for your colleagues to get started as they support the development of gsas in their own schools and districts.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:59]:

Also, I want to thank you for your work. It's really obvious how passionate you both are about this work, and I really appreciate the work that you're doing to create safe and inclusive spaces for students, but maybe even more so spaces and opportunities for them to experience connection and joy. So thank you both so much for being here today.

Jordan Applebaum [00:21:19]:

Thank you, Lawrence, and thank you for all the support that you and everyone at OPC has shown us. It's really incredible.

Robert Durocher [00:21:30]:

It was a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Susie and Lawrence for inviting me and my friend and colleague Jordan into the space.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:21:36]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and family colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:21:48]:

If you have a passion or story to share as an educational leader or would like to find out more about the other amazing professional learning opportunities offered by the OPC, please visit our website by clicking on the link in the show notes.