

EP 17 Is it Healthy High Achievement or Perfectionism?

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 [00:00:59]:

Welcome back for another episode, everyone. My name is Lawrence de Mer. Happy to be here today and really excited to welcome our guest for today's episode. Lorraine Lapointe is a retired principal from the Durham District School Board, and she's here to share some thoughts and thinking about student achievement, the idea of perfectionism and how that relates to student achievement and how that may be a driver for some of the stress and anxiety that we're seeing amongst students. So we're really interested to hear what she has to say about those matters. Welcome, Lorraine. And before we dive into the topic at hand today, maybe you could tell us a little bit about yourself and about your own leadership journey.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:01:44]:

Well, thank you so much for having me here, Lawrence. It's great to be here and great to be speaking with your audience. My own leadership journey, I would say, started when I became a teacher of special needs way, way, way back when. And I always saw student leadership as being really important. And then a few years later, of course, I became an administrator and

focused more on leadership. But throughout my. My time in education, I've always had this passion for understanding how the brain works and the strategies that we can use to overcome the perceptions that, that limit us and that hold us back. Because, you know, I saw it so often in my staff and my students and my parents, even, you know, they were focused so much on why they couldn't do something as opposed to why they could.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:02:44]:

And there was that sense of wanting to achieve and then feeling held back by that sense of perfectionism. If I don't do it right, it won't counter. Or if I don't do it right, it's not enough. My. My leadership journey basically came out of that desire to, to really understand the drivers behind excellence. And I know myself, I have often experienced that rollercoaster of excitement and exhaustion that comes with that pursuit of excellence.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:23]:

Maybe we could dive a little deeper into that then, Loren, maybe talk a little bit about some of your thinking around how this concept or idea of perfectionism shows up in schools and in teaching and learning and what kind of impact we think that's having on students and student learning.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:03:43]:

Excellence is something wonderful that we want to achieve. We want high achievement in our schools. But I'm going to give you a little bit of framework in terms of, of the work that I've done before, and that is that inside our minds, we all have not just one inner critic, but there are actually ten different forms of what I call saboteurs. And so these saboteurs basically take our strengths and take the strengths of each child, each student, each parent, each teacher, and then you turn it against us. So let me give you an example of that control. We like students to be well controlled. We like them to sit, we like them to be able to attend. We want them to be able to focus, which is all about self control.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:04:36]:

However, when the controller saboteur is really super active in someone's world, they take that sense of self control and it becomes an extreme. They not only try to control themselves, they need to, they feel like they need to control everything and everyone around them. And we all know what that's like to be with somebody who has this overbearing sense of control. So that's an example of one of the saboteurs and how it takes someone from a healthy high, you know, a desire for high achievement into the realm of unhealthy self control and controlling of others.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:05:18]:

How does a school leader or a classroom teacher then begin to identify when some of these tendencies, which might start out as good intentions to build capacity in students to, you know, towards, you know, wanting to achieve highly and do well in school, how do we develop an awareness of when these things are starting to go too far?

Lorraine Lapointe [00:05:42]:

Well, one of the things that a teacher can do is notice where the child, and we're speaking about children at the moment, but the same is for anybody in any leadership capacity as well, notice when they're either living in the past or living in the future. When we focus mainly about things that have not yet happened, we call that anxiety. When we're living in a sense of like, what I need to be doing tomorrow, next week, next month. And we're goal focused, but to the point where we aren't aware of so much of what we're doing in the present, that's an indicator that there are saboteurs having an effect on that person's thinking. So typically, we're in society. We're taught to either reflect on the past and learn from our past or live in the future and be worried about the future, but the actual time we have is now. And so how a teacher can help a student or help any students that are experiencing that sense of perfectionism not good enough, that need, that driving need to be 100% so that they don't feel that they can make any mistakes, is to reorient to the present, reorient to what's happening now, so that that switches the neurology in the brain, the saboteurs, that all those negative voices live in the lower brainstem, and they have focus, have us focus almost entirely either on past or present or future, rather, not present. And so one of the things that I teach my clients and students to do is to focus themselves on the present and what's going on for them right now.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:07:43]:

Of course, that can be somatic work. They can focus on their body and their feelings, they can focus on their thoughts. They can become aware of what they're doing in that moment and then make a different choice.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:07:58]:

So that sounds to me like what some educators might refer to as sort of mindfulness practices. Does that sort of connect to what you're indicating here?

Lorraine Lapointe [00:08:10]:

Certainly mindfulness is a part of this system. Mindfulness certainly does bring you into present. But in my book, perfectionism unplugged, I talk about seven different strategies for overcoming and transforming that fear that students are feeling into the fuel for success, so that they can become more powerful in the moment, more centred, more connected with who they are. A lot of that sense of not being enough, driven, aka driven perfectionism, is birthed in that sense of, I'm not enough, I'm going to fail. I can't make a mistake. I must do it right. I must be the best. And so we can provide many different strategies, but mindfulness is certainly one of them.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:09:04]:

Another one is called positive intelligence. And positive intelligence is actually a combination of IQ, which we know as how are you smart? And EQ, which is your awareness of self and others to increase your positive intelligence, or PQ. And there are all kinds of inner sizes. You know, how exercises we lift weights to strengthen our physical muscles, inner sizes strengthen our mind muscles, so that we can make that neurological switch more easily and more effectively.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:09:42]:

So I'm thinking of, you know, how teachers would, you know, design classroom environments and or, you know, how their pedagogy in the classroom, how they actually design the learning experiences. Are there recommendations that you would make for how they go about those things that would, you know, switch some of this overemphasis on achievement to creating a more balanced kind of experience for students.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:10:12]:

Yeah, some teachers are already doing that really well, Lawrence. They're starting their classes off with a mindfulness experience, or they'll take one to two minutes at the beginning of any activity and have students centre themselves, ground and connect, feel their feet on the floor, feel that where their hands are on a desk, get a sense of where their body is in time and space that gives the orientation to the present. And from that perspective, they can then start to do their work and start to interact and doing the activities that they're being asked to do. When we give an assignment to students or we ask them to do something and their brain is not here yet, it's not focused in the moment is when the stress really kicks in and so we can help students de stress. It doesn't have to be a long time. I teach all kinds of inner sizes, which are 15 to 30 seconds long. The one that I like to share that works really super well for me and for most of my clients is to put your index finger and your thumb together and just rock them back and forth. And when you rock them back and forth, you can become aware of the ridges on both your finger and your thumb.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:11:37]:

And when you have that sensation, you can take a deep breath and then switch to the second finger and rock it gently back and forth on your finger and your thumb until you have the ridges on that set of, and then take a deep breath and move to the third.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:12:01]:

That's really interesting. I was doing that as you were describing it. And it really does bring you into the moment, doesn't it?

Lorraine Lapointe [00:12:07]:

Yeah, it does. And how long did that take? 10 seconds, 15 seconds? It felt like a longer time because our neurology is switching and we get a different sense of time. Similarly, when someone says, oh, I don't have time to do that, I don't have time to do something. If they take a moment and pause and do an inner size of some kind, all of a sudden, time feels like it stretches, it slows down, you become more present in your life, more present at the time. You bring more of your brain power online, and of course, then you accomplish more, you do more, you achieve more.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:12:53]:

I can see how those strategies would be very helpful for students to kind of self monitor and self correct, if that's the right term, or bring themselves back. Certainly these are strategies that teachers can use in the classrooms. I'm wondering if we could zoom out to sort of the school level or system level. Even within a school district, some of the language that we use about

achievement and about grades, awards ceremonies, just how we really frame. I'm going to use the word worthiness or our definition of success for students and sometimes really focus it on a narrow band of things that we consider to be achievement. You know, what's your thoughts on how school principals, for example, or school leaders or system leaders can start to, to move the needle on this?

Lorraine Lapointe [00:13:46]:

Well, one of the things as a leader, when I was a principal, that I didn't recognize what I was doing. But now, after doing all of the studies on the brain and how the brain works, I can see why it worked so well. And that is instead of being externally driven. So instead of giving the sense of achievement through awards to someone, whether you're at a system level or whether you're in a classroom level, instead of going from the outside in, you encourage the individual to acknowledge their own achievement. So you bring it from the inside out, because really, it's not important whether you win an award or whether someone else thinks that you've done really well. What we fail to train our children and we don't recognize our leaders for, is when they can acknowledge themselves from within. So it's not how do I. How well I think you did, which is, unfortunately, our school systems are predicated on, you know, you got that right.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:14:55]:

You got that wrong. You know, you need to redo this or redo that instead, having it come from within the person themselves. Tell me what you think about the work that you've just done. Tell me how you think you might have improved it. Did you do your best work? What would you do differently next time? Those kinds of questions move from the external to the internal. And once a child or a leader or any individual begins to be able to recognize within themselves that they have achieved something of value. That's healing, that's healthy high achievement. And it becomes quite often at first, when you ask those kinds of questions, people don't know how to answer them.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:15:49]:

Whether they're children or adults, they don't know how to answer them, because we've set up a system that is so predicated on giving feedback and giving them the kudos or telling them what they've done right or wrong. And what we, in essence, do is we strengthen those saboteurs, those inner saboteurs, instead of weakening them by having the individual self assess. And the key piece to this is self celebration. The difference between healthy high achievement and perfectionism is the ability to celebrate oneself. Because perfectionism, there's no celebration. There's, it's constant driving forces that things need to be 100%, need to be better, need to be, you know, and that something awful will happen if you don't hit that hundred percent. And that's it. It's just not the truth.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:16:52]:

It's a saboteur lie. That that is a state of being healthy. High achievement is all about being able to do what you do and then celebrate what's been done. You can celebrate with others, but it shouldn't be dependent on others celebrating you. It should come from within.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:14]:

Yeah, I really like that term, healthy high achievement. I like how you framed, you know, that switch from relying on external indicators of your success or your worth to an inner set of criteria. And I certainly know from my work thinking about how to develop critical thinking in students, that having them internalise that criteria and be able to apply it themselves also develops critical thinking skills in students as well.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:17:45]:

It's a really key life skill when somebody achieved something and then they look outside of themselves to find out how well they did. Babies need to rely on external information in order to function. But when a child is born, I mean, there's no baby on the planet that doesn't think themselves absolutely fantastic. I mean, they goo and they gah. And they, you know, if something's wrong, they. They cry out loud. Babies are born with a really clear sense of who they are and a sense that they're important and that they can do things. And then slowly, as they learn more, it gets edited out of them.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:18:31]:

And I think that our system can edit it back in. What we edit out, we can edit back in.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:38]:

I know we could probably talk about this all day, but I'm just thinking that maybe we could identify sort of one takeaway that you would hope that school principals would take away from today's conversation. What might that be?

Lorraine Lapointe [00:18:53]:

The one takeaway that I would suggest is that they do some self reflection. And when they get the sense that they need to be doing something and imposing an idea, a thought, a structure on others, that they just take a pause and see if they can possibly build in the structure, that sense of self reflection into it for their students, because they would be giving a gift of a lifetime, a lifetime's healthiness, instead of what I was trained to do, which was impose structure in my building for my people, for my students, for my staff. And I wish I'd known then what I know now, which is instead be of service and pull that out of them, like ask more questions. What would I do differently? What would I do is I would ask more questions. I would ask big questions like what makes that good for you? You know, how did that feel for you when you achieved that? As opposed to me telling them they've done a good job and pat them on the head and toss them another fish.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:14]:

I really want to thank you, Lorraine, for spending some time with us today and sharing your thinking on this matter. I know in an era where we are really hyper aware of and focused on creating environments and experiences that are going to help students develop positive mental health and wellness as a balanced approach to education, this is a really important consideration. So thank you so much for spending time with us.

Lorraine Lapointe [00:20:41]:

Oh, you're very welcome. And they're all good coaching questions, so if somebody really wants to dig in, that's where I would suggest that they start to look. Is learning more about coaching questions. It'll be healthier for them and healthier for those that they interact with. And thank you for having me here today and the opportunity to speak with your audience.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:21:06]:

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 colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:21:18]:

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