

EP 21 Community Circles

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 [00:00:22]:

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]:

Really looking forward to another episode here today, and our topic today is going to be about community circles and how to use circles in schools to build community and belonging. And we're really delighted today to be welcoming Kim Esdaile, who is Principal in the Ottawa Carleton District School Board. Welcome, Kim. We're delighted to have you here on the podcast. And before we dive into your topic of passion there, maybe you could just tell us a little bit about yourself, your context, and you know a little bit about your leadership journey.

Kim Esdale [00:01:37]:

Sure. Thank you so much Lawrence, and I really appreciate the opportunity to join you today and share some of my learning. Yes, my name is Kim Esdaile. I am the proud principal at this time of a little school in Ottawa, Lady Evelyn Alternative School. I was born and raised in Ottawa on this unceded and unsurrendered traditional territory of the Algonquin and Anishinaabe people, and I was adopted as an infant, so I was raised by my adoptive family in Ottawa. My father was a fantastic role model. Unfortunately, he left us too early when I was only eleven years old, but he certainly shaped me in those eleven years with a lot of his own leadership and

also including me in that. Some of my passions: I had the opportunity to figure skate and I'm a lifelong learner there and also now judging and competing and then also a mother of four.

Kim Esdale [00:02:31]:

So the great privilege to be sort of try and be a really good ancestor and situate myself in my own learning and try and do the best I can for not only the children, you know, and the colleagues that I work with, but also my own children. So I started my career as a kindergarten teacher with the OCDSB. So I'm a few decades in now and had the privilege to work at many different schools within the OCDSB and then branched into special education, had the opportunity to sort of lead and learn in those areas, and then got into administration in the last several years. I think one of my passions really or a passion is just learning and being a lifelong learner., so learning from others and with others, you know, listening actively to all stories and lived experiences and learning what each child needs and helping others to do that so that we can ensure that each child really succeeds. And situating myself, you know, in my own learning and upbringing, shifting, you know, the colonial lens and structures and inequities and really seeing the continued marginalisation that must be addressed, you know, within our systems. So I think bringing indigenous perspectives and that respect in the land based learning is a big part of what we're working to do at Lady Evelyn.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:54]:

I think there are lots of school leaders in a lot of different contexts right now in Ontario looking for those approaches to education that are going to transform spaces to be more inclusive and to create greater sense of belonging among students. And I guess, as you said, a more student centred approach to education. So I know that one of the things that you spent a lot of time learning about and practising in your own context is how to use circles to build that sense of belonging and student engagement and to start that transformation away from transactional approaches to more relationship based approaches. So you want to tell us a little bit about some of your work there and what you've learned?

Kim Esdale [00:04:38]:

Absolutely. I really, I'd love to share that. And I also want to ground it in some of Dr. Reeves work on focused implementation. And really the big message there is really being intentional about what practices we're going to bring into our spaces. And often doing less is actually doing more. So looking at what we can de-implement and then, you know, what we can implement. So circles is one of the few things that we're implementing, but going deeper into at our school. So we started that actually this school year, not that we hadn't done it before, but we started doing it very, very intentionally this year.

Kim Esdale [00:05:17]:

And really circles, although definitely grounded in indigenous culture knowledge, have been a part of cultures from time immemorial all over the world. So there's so many nice connections to all of the families when we have a circle. The significance of that is, first of all, we're all equal in a circle. So I'll give you a really simple example. We used to line up when we came into school so that children come onto the yard, they have some playtime, the bell rings, line up in your

rows, which I'm sure is a practice still, at many schools it's fairly typical. So we just looked at what could we do every morning to be consistent, to change a little practice. It's not adding to what we're doing. We're going to de-implement the lines and we're just going to meet as a community first thing in the morning, whether it's summer, winter, fall or spring, outside in a circle. So that looks like us doing our morning announcements in a circle.

Kim Esdale [00:06:18]:

We're doing our land acknowledgement in a circle. Oftentimes students or classes have something that they're presenting some initiative. We always have three grounding principles at our school that we've come up with, and that is curiosity, kindness and gratitude. So we just ground ourselves in those three principles and we start our day like that. So that's just one example of where we've implemented circles. And as a staff, we've looked at other ways to implement a circles. So what we're noticing is within the classes, learning is happening in circles where students have different opportunities and that can be integrated into any subject area. But all students feel that they have an equal voice.

Kim Esdale [00:07:04]:

There's always an opportunity to pass if, you know, if they don't want to participate, but they're still part of that circle community and there can be different types of circles. So in our learning, and even in a restorative piece where we would sometimes need to come together if there's been a conflict. Conflicts are natural, but sometimes students or even staff, they need an opportunity to restore and understand from one another. So just sitting in that circle formation is really helpful and following some of those principles. What I was going to say about the learning circles is you can have lots of types. You can have a sequential go around. You can have a non sequential that's more frequently structured. You can have what we call a fishbowl with an inner or outer circle. So there's lots of different opportunities for learning that look a little bit different.

Kim Esdale [00:07:55]:

But we keep coming back to circles because the principles are equality. There's safety and trust built in. Everyone's offered an opportunity to play the role in the outcome. There's some facilitation, ownership, and then the connections is the big piece, really, really building the connections.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:08:15]:

You talked about, you know, I think your words were, you know, in the circle we're all equal. And in your introductory comments there, I think you mentioned a little bit about, you know, colonial structures and those kinds of things. And I think some would argue that, you know, school systems are kind of built on those colonial structures that really emphasise hierarchical kinds of power structures. So maybe you could talk a little bit about how your staff is adjusting to maybe a new way of seeing distributed sort of power in those circle situations.

Kim Esdale [00:08:51]:

That's a great question, Lawrence. And even our staff meetings are in circles and we have different staff members sort of leading a circle question or a circle prompt around learning. And

another example of, I think, you know, in a way, coming back to more of an Indigenous way of knowing, we mix the children up a lot in our school. So that may not always look like a circle, but an example would be when we have our morning circles, the children are invited to stand wherever they want. So our kindergarten students many times are going across to stand with one of the grade six students. Right? So it really mixes up the learning. And we do a lot of cross-class and cross age integration, which is a different way of knowing and learning and building, where the students have more of a responsibility of learning from and with each other.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:09:52]:

I really love, by the way, when you mentioned your three principles that kind of ground this practice, I think you said curiosity, kindness and gratitude. I think those are like really amazing foundational kind of principles or values there to include as part of this practice. So that's really great. So your staff, I think the way you've described it, is really kind of embracing this as a way of being in a learning situation with students. Are you including somehow your parents and caregivers in this practice?

Kim Esdale [00:10:25]:

Yeah, we absolutely do. So certainly in our messaging about, you know, them speaking to their children, but there are often a lot of volunteers at our school. So, for example, today we do something called our Wonder Wednesdays, where our kindergartens take a trip off site and do some experiential land based learning at a park a little bit down the road from us. So lots of parents there. So of course that starts, starts off the kindergarten day. So we had all those parents joining us in the circle. This morning I'm coming back to my morning circles because that's really where we round our day. And that's a, that's been a big practice change.

Kim Esdale [00:11:00]:

We also had our community evening recently, and this is a good chance for me to share that last year we worked with Mark Seabrook, who is Algonquin Anishinaabe artist, and his older adult daughters actually attended this school. So there's a nice community connection there, even though he lives on Manitoulin island now and we've been friends for a while and I've worked with him at other sites. So Mark and the school community came together to collaborate on a mural that was completed last year. So really, the mural is a land acknowledgement in and of itself. And it is the woodland style art inspired by Norval Morrisseau. So a lot of learning around there, but a lot of circles were incorporated in that mural. And, in fact, we're very fortunate because this building was built with a huge rotunda in the inside.

Kim Esdale [00:11:51]:

So our foyer is in the shape of a circle, and the mural sort of wraps around that. And then we have a beautiful skylight to look up three floors. It's quite stunning, really. So we've got that, you know, built into the building, unbeknownst to me when I came in as principal, but it certainly lends itself to our work. And Mark was able to do a lot of learning and teaching with the students around some of the circles that were built into the mural. And some of those pieces were, for example, The Seven Tenets. So we're an alternative school, so we're grounded in seven tenets: cooperation and teamwork, innovative approaches, multi age groupings, again, which is a little

bit different and more traditional to certain cultures in practice, integrating the curriculum and community.

Kim Esdale [00:12:43]:

Parent/guardian support, family support, and then looking at our assessment and evaluation in different ways. And then the other, I guess, the 7th there, I'm trying to remember them off the top of my head, would be student voice. So a balance between student and teacher, directed learning and teaching. So those things fit in really beautifully with the mural. And we incorporated those in seven circles that interweave through the mural. And within those seven circles, Mark worked with the community to illustrate those principles, using sort of land based imagery that people would understand. So, for example, for the cooperation and teamwork, there's an image of some Canada geese. So some learning around how the leaders take turns when they are migrating and forming that V, so something that's really tangible.

Kim Esdale [00:13:35]:

So that's just one example, but then examples all the way through that mural that really can be understood by the youngest children when we're looking up at the sky and looking at those geese and what they're doing to anyone. So good learning for everyone and accessible to everyone. And then the medicine wheel, which is a more contemporary, from my understanding, Indigenous symbol. And that medicine wheel is always divided into the four parts, so that can be seen in all different ways. So learning around that, it can be, you know, your emotions, your intellect, your spirit, your physical well being. It can be the four seasons. It can be the water, the fire, the earth and the air. It can be the stars, the sun, the earth and the moon, the cardinal directions.

Kim Esdale [00:14:18]:

So, so many things are that cyclical, you know, number of four. So endless possibilities of learning when we're looking at a circle from different approaches. So taking what looks like a really simple concept, but endless ways that we can integrate that and make those connections and build that community.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:14:40]:

Yeah, that sounds really deep learning that you're doing there, by using that sort of metaphor and incorporating that philosophy across so many different aspects of your learning day, that really must create a lot of great opportunities for learning and certainly some coherence, I guess, across, you know, the kind of language and approach that teachers and students are expecting in their school day. So that's amazing. Can you talk a little bit about some of the impact that you've seen? So you're doing lots of work here, obviously, to build this practice across your school community. What are you seeing or what do you see as being some of the great impacts or the positive impacts from this work?

Kim Esdale [00:15:22]:

I can speak to the benefits that we've seen through this school year. I don't know if I can say it's directly related to the circles, but I suspect that a lot of it could be because as we know, it all

comes back to a sense of belonging, a sense of community, a sense of being seen and heard. Some of the children and even the teachers or all staff, all educators in the building, because we're using these circles, I'm seeing an improvement on things like, if I look at my data, there were more children spending more time outside classrooms. So that elopement piece that we know about where children may feel overwhelmed, they may be seeking a different space or something else that we need to help them figure out. So we're seeing a lot more class cohesiveness, which is awesome, right? Like, we know that students need to feel comfortable in their space and feel safe in their space to learn. So that has been something that we've really noticed this year. And as I said, is it attributable only to circles? I mean, there's a lot of great things going on, but it's markedly improved. We're also seeing more positive behaviours from students.

Kim Esdale [00:16:36]:

So I think it comes down to, you know, a sense of safety and belonging because we know that behaviours, if they're not functional for the student or what have you, it's coming from a stress behaviour. It's coming from somewhere. So we're seeing a lot, a lot more of our children settled, able to be a little bit more flexible, able to restore those conflicts. Conflicts are natural and we talk about those things all the time, but those tools and that enduring understanding of equality and I have a voice and we can be supported to problem solve together. I think those things are starting to reflect in more successful regulation within the building in many ways.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:25]:

This all sounds so positive to me, which is great. I'm just wondering, have there been any challenges in trying to grow this practice in your school?

Kim Esdale [00:17:39]:

I wouldn't say a challenge because in some ways it's a simple thing to integrate. So I haven't found that students or staff find it difficult to integrate. It's just a change in practice. So it's not that we're layering on additional, you know, stresses or expectations, it's just a small shift in practice. I think for me, as the principal, when I think about challenges, it's just thinking about, you know, what more can we do with this now that we've had a really successful year, how do we continue to grow this practice, share it with other educators and other children? So I guess that's my challenge and I would put that out to staff. When we have our last staff meeting, we're going to say, you know, what are we going to stop, what are we going to continue and how are we going to deepen the things that really work? I mean, I think I know the answer, but I don't want to speak for others. But I'm quite certain that, you know, just from anecdotal evidence and feedback, that staff are really, really happy and they've really integrated this piece really, really successfully this year. So how we can deepen it, I think the possibilities are endless.

Kim Esdale [00:18:58]:

So I'm excited about that.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:19:00]:

Yes, I'm sure that your staff will have some great ideas about how to continue to integrate this into more aspects of their work. So that's fantastic. So as we kind of draw to the close of our conversation, I wanted to ask you, there will be lots of school leaders out there who I'm sure will want to experience the same kinds of success that you have with circle. So if you were going to give them some advice about how to get started, what would be a powerful tip that you could leave them to get started with circles? What would you leave them with?

Kim Esdale [00:19:34]:

I would leave them with less is more to start, so less implementation of initiatives as leaders were bombarded with information. So we've got to be really careful about what we're going to implement regularly and how we're going to do it. So I would share that circles for us here at Lady Evelyn as a staff have been a successful implementation, and I think my advice is to pick something like this, or if you wanted to start with circles, but make sure it's consistent. So I gave you the example of our morning circles. So it's something that we do every day, and every time I'm standing out in that circle, I feel grateful, like it's just a really great way to ground our day. So picking, you know, one way to implement a circle and then layering in another way, maybe in a month, but not making it overwhelming.

Kim Esdale [00:20:28]:

And the other piece about circles is it's a great way to really work on active listening for myself as a leader and then also teaching that skill to our children because it's so, so important to be an active listening and to really, really understand what we're, what we're hearing from other people to build those relationships.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:49]:

So, Kim, I really want to thank you so much for taking time to be with us today and for sharing your experience with circles. And I think, you know, it's very clear how passionate you are about this work and how much you care about the well being of your students. So thanks so much for being with us today and for sharing.

Kim Esdale [00:21:08]:

Thank you so much, Lawrence. It was my pleasure.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:21:12]:

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 [00:21:24]:

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