

EP 05 - School / Community Read Alouds

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 to twelve 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.

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

Enjoy. Welcome back to another episode of Leadership Talks. Great to be with you, Lawrence, for another great conversation. Joining us today is Gurmeet Gill from the Peel District School Board. Great to have you with us, Gurmeet. Welcome.

Gurmeet Gill [00:01:09]:

Thank you. Great to be here.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:13]:

Yes, great to connect with you again, Gurmeet. And we're really looking forward to kind of jumping in and probing a little bit on some of the work you've been doing. But before we kind of get going with our topic for today, maybe you could just take a moment to give us a little bit about yourself and perhaps your journey in education or education leadership and what's brought you to this point.

Gurmeet Gill [00:01:37]:

Sure. Thank you so much and I'm glad to be here. And again, as you know, my name is Gurmeet Gill and I have been serving the Peel District School Board from the past 25 years. And during the time I have had lots of opportunities to work in various schools from kindergarten to grade eight. You always remember one of those leaders who inspire you, who encourage you. So one of my principals, she encouraged me to take a role of an instructional resource teacher, and I did—with a little hesitancy., but I did. And I'm glad I did because I enjoyed that role as it offered.

Gurmeet Gill [00:02:20]:

There were endless opportunities of new learning and that learning that I took from my colleagues and from those workshops, I was able to share it back within my schools. And this made me a better educator and a person because I was able to bring that learning back into the schools on students' desks. Currently, I am serving a k to eight school as a principal with the Peel District School Board and I always strongly feel that my interactions with staff, students and families, they have made me a better person and educator. And regardless of what hat I wear, I always believe that I'm a teacher at heart who loves picture books.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:03:10]:

Well, what a perfect way to introduce today's topic, which is read alouds, and how this, along with literacy development, can support more inclusive practices. So Gurmeet. We'd love to hear more about your passion for reading and how this translates to the school.

Gurmeet Gill [00:03:25]:

You know, as I shared, I love reading picture books and I have a great collection in my office at home and currently we have a book fair in the school and my eyes were looking for the new picture book collection that I can add to my library and I just also enjoy listening to podcasts, attending professional development sessions, try to stay current. But I know my passion lies in reading picture books. I strongly believe that everyone can relate to picture books and who wouldn't want to be a part of the read aloud in the classroom or at the comfort of their home in their pjs along with their family and grandparents. Both adults and children enjoy being read to them and it takes all of us to places and be with the characters, experiencing their experiences or creating our own different stories. Read alouds, I strongly believe that it allows us to ask questions, make connections, and I take pride in finding meaningful and creative ways to build strong community relationships. And today I'm going to share how I use read alouds to bring the community together while also supporting our school and board goals of dismantling oppressive practices to create an inclusive and equitable school environment. As I'm thinking about my story, sharing my story, I would like to start my story from the COVID time.

Gurmeet Gill [00:05:00]:

As you know, during COVID time there was a feeling of isolation and the absence of normal events at schools, and to bring the community together was not possible. As we all know, everyone was looking for ways to connect, to beat that isolation and be with the community. Classes were online and the opportunities for the whole school to come together were missing. And everyone was missing that part of being together, coming together, being in the gym and

being at the assemblies. So then I thought, how are we going to bring our community together while we're still online? So we started a community read aloud and school wide read aloud to bring the community together. So in our community read aloud , families—I still remember all of those evenings—but the very first one was such a key.

Gurmeet Gill [00:05:55]:

The very first community evening, there were families came together. We saw grandparents there, they were preschool siblings in their pjs along with their stuffed toys at the comfort of their own homes, and the whole family enjoyed read aloud.

Gurmeet Gill [00:06:12]:

Again., they asked questions, made connections, and reflected on the events and shared their perspectives. And it was great because students would suggest what books they would like us to read to the whole school. So they had their voice in selecting the next books, and our families eagerly waited for the read aloud and students didn't want to miss those opportunities. And I know because when during the COVID time, sometimes we have some students in the building, some students online, and they will always ask a question, when is our next read aloud? And along with the community read aloud, then we started the school wide read aloud as well to bring the school community together. And now we know as the COVID situation has subsided, we continued with the school wide read aloud. But again, there was intentionality in that. When we selected books, there was always the purpose. Why are we selecting those books? We wanted to ensure that students see themselves reflected and they see themselves represented in the books that we select.

Gurmeet Gill [00:07:26]:

So our read aloud focused on black excellence, rich Indigenous culture, and ways of knowing and doing and celebrating our students' cultures, their identities, their lived experiences. We've done lots of different books, but I'm going to share some examples, some titles of the books that we used for the read aloud. For example, the Water Walker, the Proudest Blue, Julian is a Mermaid, Hair Love, I am Enough, I am Perfectly Designed, Mommy is my Hair Nice and Archie Celebrates Diwali or the Many Colours of Harpreet Singh are just a few examples. Again, intentionality was the key. And again, student voice and choice also played a part in selecting those books. And the magic was that these books celebrated our students, but also it also supported promoting social justice aspects as well. I still remember after reading the water Walker, one class engaged in doing more research about the Indigenous community's struggle to have clean and fresh water. After the water walker read aloud and then they prepared slideshows, and then their work was also shared with the whole school community to bring more awareness about the water crisis in the Indigenous communities, but also around the world.

Gurmeet Gill [00:08:52]:

When we do something, slowly and gradually it expands so gradually we started inviting our student leaders and local community authors to share the read alouds. And from last year, I've also started using strategies to support science of reading strategies happening in the classrooms, such as when we read a book and there's a big word that comes in during the read

aloud, we will say, oh, this is a big word. How we can use the strategies that we are learning in our classroom to read this big words, maybe clapping the syllables in the words or chunking the word, or looking for small words to read a challenging word. And students love doing this together. And always in the chat we will say, students will say, how many syllables?

Kindergarten class to grade eight, how many syllables? Again, based on their grade level, they will be participating through chats and through writing comments about the read aloud.

Gurmeet Gill [00:09:55]:

Thanks Gurmeet, I mean, I can hear your excitement about this work, and I'm sure that that's infectious for your school community as well. I'm sure that's part of the reason why it's been successful for you. And I really liked what you said about people enjoying that sensation or that experience of being read to, that there's this need for kind of shared experience, whether that's, and you mentioned connections, whether it's connections to the books themselves or connections to each other, it's just definitely something that we need. So I hear what you're saying about the students clearly giving you some feedback about titles they want to hear and so on. But what kind of feedback are you getting from the staff or from families? Do you have a formal way of sort of gathering feedback from them, or what kind of anecdotal feedback are you getting from staff and families about this?

Gurmeet Gill [00:10:50]:

So we were talking about the feedback from parents and staff and the parents. We meet parents during our focus group meetings or during other community meetings, and parents share that it's such a great opportunity because it was a time for the families to come together and listen to the read aloud. And this also supported our siblings, the student siblings who are not like school age children yet, but they will be coming to our school. So they built that connection with our school communities that this is their school they were listening to with the rest of the school as well. And there was a positive feedback from parents as well. And with staff after the read aloud, we do the read aloud for the school community, and when you go to the classrooms and the kids come to you, you say, oh I remember Mrs. Gill, when we read this book.

Gurmeet Gill [00:11:44]:

Or then you will see the examples of the follow up work that is happening in the classrooms. Sometimes students will come and show their work about that book because that read aloud didn't just stop there, it continued. The more further discussions continue to happen in the classrooms, whether it's kind of a written work or more creative work, and the students will come and show, and also we will look and see on the classroom walls, too, the follow up work, or maybe they have read similar book. So the feedback was great. And that's how we continued with that, even though I changed my school location and because it was so positive and positive feedback and impactful on student learning, this work, so I just continued the same kind of journey here at my new location as well.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:12:41]:

Gurmeet, it sounds like you're enhancing a strategy for literacy development and also at the same time, creating an authentic starting point for inquiry and conversation. What do you want

our listeners to remember from this conversation and perhaps bring back to their own schools and communities?

Gurmeet Gill [00:12:57]:

Some of the ideas that I felt we can take back and I will continue to use this in my buildings, is just like embrace your passion and interest to create meaningful and impactful initiatives such as building and promoting equitable practices within your school communities through read aloud. And also I strongly believe that intentionality plays a huge role. And asking yourself every time when we have a phone conversation or we are a new resources coming into our building, how this is going to support our student learning and their well being. These are the great questions to ask yourself. The intentionality and the why. Again, take risks. Don't be afraid to try something new. And this was the first time we tried our first read aloud and we had almost in the first there were like more than 100 families participating in the virtual read aloud. So again, don't be afraid.

Gurmeet Gill [00:14:05]:

And the first time we do something we learn from it and then we just continue to make changes and make it better the next time. And also be open to listening to your students, staff and community, their feedback, and through student and parent focus groups we learned that students are enjoying the read aloud, as I shared earlier and the questions and comments during the chats, it indicated the engagement. So again, just to receive feedback to see whether what we are doing is working or your staff, students and families are enjoying it, or maybe they have additional feedback. And again, there's so many talents and wealth of knowledge in our surroundings, in our buildings. Let's utilise it. So those are some of the things I would just suggest my colleagues to take away.

Gurmeet Gill [00:15:00]:

Well, Gurmeet, I really want to thank you for sharing your experience with using read aloud as a strategy today. So obviously a very powerful way to build community and really rich learning experiences for your students. So we really appreciate you taking the time to share with us today.

Gurmeet Gill [00:15:19]:

It's my pleasure sharing my journey about the read alouds. So it was a pleasure to be here and sharing my experiences with my colleagues.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:15:31]:

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 [00:15:43]:

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.