

S4 E1: Safe and Inclusive Schools with Harmony Movement

Episode Highlights

This episode explores the growing issue of harmful and discriminatory language in Canadian schools. Clint Johnston, CTF/FCE President, provides an overview of the situation in Canadian schools, along with the contributing factors, while emphasizing the urgent need for safe learning and working environments.

With special guests from Harmony Movement – Janelle Yanishewski and Taraneh Vejdani – this compelling discussion emphasizes the serious effects of this language, the shared responsibility of the entire school community, actionable strategies to create safe learning spaces, and the positive outcomes of speaking up.

Clint Johnston, CTF/FCE President: Contextual Introduction

For students to learn, and for teachers to teach, everyone needs to feel safe—socially, emotionally, and psychologically. Across Canada, teachers are telling us that aggression and harmful language are on the rise. Violence isn't always physical. It can be verbal—harassment, threats, swearing, insults, exclusion, or cyberbullying. It can also take the form of bias-based bullying, where someone is targeted because of their identity. Research shows that verbal violence is more common than physical violence, yet it's often minimized, under-reported, or dismissed as “just words.” In the 2023 International Barometer of Education Staff survey, Canada ranked the highest among 10 countries, with 40% of education staff reporting they had been victims of verbal violence at work.

That's why the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) is calling on the federal government and the Council of Ministers of Education to enhance legal protections for teachers and education workers in the face of growing harassment, intimidation, and online abuse. We're calling for stronger enforcement of existing workplace safety laws, and for Canada to uphold its commitments under international conventions that protect workers from violence and harassment. Because what happens in our classrooms doesn't just affect teachers and students—it shapes our future workplaces and communities.

Harmony Movement: Harmful Language in Canadian Schools

Discriminatory language is a universal issue in Canadian schools, from primary grades through secondary, and is becoming alarmingly normalized. Educators and school boards recognize this as a critical issue that demands attention and are looking for support.

The Impacts on Educators

Educators have a responsibility to create safe learning spaces and so the burden of addressing harmful language often falls on them. As a result, they must navigate immense pressures with limited resources and support. Even when they are not direct targets of harmful language, educators as well as the whole school community suffer from the toxic environment created by harmful language. The resulting constant tension adds to the ever-growing fatigue of staff, diminishing their emotional ability to manage the issue and creating a vicious cycle. As Taraneh points out, the toxic behaviour that harmful language represents has repercussions on the school community as a whole, and it is therefore the shared responsibility of the entire community to respond and act towards a solution.

Strategies, Tools, and Dialogue: How Can Educators Address Harmful Language?

Janelle shares strategies to empower educators and the whole school community, and provide tools to navigate these challenging environments. Through the Words Matter campaign, Harmony Movement has provided a framework for educators to facilitate these important conversations. Storytelling and restorative justice approaches are emphasized to create safe spaces, maintain human dignity, and foster understanding. The goal is to support victims, educate the community, understand the impact of harmful language, and reintegrate those who've used harmful language, paving the way for cultural shifts.

The 5-Part Framework

Harmony Movement offers a comprehensive framework: interrupt, explain, acknowledge, support, and reintegrate. This restorative justice approach is crucial in creating cultural change within school environments. Taraneh also emphasizes the importance of relationship building to create safe spaces and acknowledging harm through holding each other accountable as a collective.

Positive Impacts and Culture Shifts

Janelle highlights significant positive changes – schools reporting increased confidence among educators who have undergone training. Culture shifts are evident as proactive conversations about language become part of the school fabric. Future training modules will specifically address key issues like anti-black, homophobic, and transphobic language.

Final Thoughts

As daunting as the task may seem, every educator's action makes an impact. Taraneh urges them to recognize the meaningful change they create by merely intervening. Janelle affirms that addressing harmful language is integral to building safe and inclusive schools where everyone belongs.

Conclusion

Harmony Movement is an inspiring testament to the power of collective action in education. By confronting harmful language head-on, schools can transform into places where every individual feels safe and valued. The words we choose matter profoundly, and every effort to promote positive language is a step towards a more inclusive school community. Through partnership and proactive change, Harmony Movement is paving the way for a brighter, more inclusive future for Canadian schools.