

LEADING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY THROUGH A PANDEMIC

with Dr. Jerome Cranston Ph.D

Wednesdays @ 2 pm MDT (Saskatchewan)
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Episode #7 - The Effects of Covid-19 on Communities of Colour w/ Michelle Jean-Paul
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In this week's episode Dr. Cranston spoke with Michelle Jean-Paul who is a public school principal in Winnipeg, a PhD candidate at the University of Manitoba, and founder of the Educators of Colour Network. Below is a summary of their conversation.

Dr. Cranston: Although we have learned the Covid-19 virus itself does not discriminate, its impact on certain communities is clearly more profound. From your perspective, how have you seen this pandemic impact racial minoritized students and the communities of color that they belong to?

Jean-Paul: I have spoken to colleagues, friends, and families who are being directly affected by this and what I've heard reinforces what I see as the overarching challenge within the education system as viewed through the anti-racist lens from which I do much of my theoretical research, and that is that our school systems are designed to cater to the dominant perspective and dominant values. When we have a system that functions in that way, everything that we put into practice and implement is done through that perspective. As the education system reacts to the current Covid-19 situation, we haven't slowed down enough to look at things from an anti-racist or decolonized lens and think about how the work we are doing affects marginalized communities. It ties back to representation within our workforce in the school system, from the school level, to the board office level, to the government level. If this representation existed, then when these types of things surface we wouldn't be so reactive to them but it would be more a part of the immediate response and planning. We need to think more about the voices in our community when we make decisions regarding home learning and remote learning. Decision-makers look to systematize things because that's the most efficient way, but a systematized approach oftentimes doesn't respond to the needs of our most vulnerable communities and their members, because their values and ways of being exist outside of this system. When we don't consider our systematic approach through a critical lens, we risk further

isolating and marginalizing some of these communities of colour from the school system which can already feel like a very unwelcoming place despite our best efforts as educators.

Dr. Cranston: As a principal about to open a brand new school, what are a couple of your main concerns when it comes to reopening schools that are made up of richly diverse populations?

Jean-Paul: The well known saying of “nothing for us, without us” comes to mind for me. How are school leaders at all levels, engaging our communities as to what these next steps look like. They can’t just assume what communities of colour want or need, but have to actually be asking them and including them in the response. Decision-makers need to be aware of aspects such as relationships and human connectedness that us educators value so highly. We need to be creative about how we enter communities and promote this, whether it be through food hampers, car parades, or other innovative practices. We need to keep these things in mind when we go back to school and make sure we are meeting the communities where they are and making sure to bring them along, and include them in decisions.

Dr. Cranston: I agree with you that the notion of finding our place is very important. We need to allow people who have not always had an opportunity to have their voices heard to be front and center as we make these decisions.

I’m very impressed with your sense of optimism and hope, especially given the anti-racist and critical race theory lenses you work from which can weigh on a person. Where does that optimism come from?

Jean-Paul: It comes from the fact that I am connected to a lineage of strength, endurance, and perseverance and I don’t take that lightly at all. I think of the struggle that my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents went through so that I could have the privileges I do now and also my day to day work with children. You can’t work with kids and not feel a sense of hope, joy, and a desire to make things better. Even small or seemingly insignificant acts have the potential to make a difference and create a more full sense of community, and for me those are the small victories that I feed off of. There are some big losses and burdens that come in this line of work and if it weren’t for those things and the work of educators who came before me, like you and my father, driving me to pay it forward for the next generation of educators of colour to hopefully have it easier still.

Dr. Cranston: I appreciate that but guys like me need to get out of the way because there are women like you and binaries who are going to far surpass any of the good work we are doing. Thank you for making the time for us today Michelle and we look forward to seeing what work you do in the future.