



Ontario Institute for Education Leadership L'Institut de leadership en éducation de l'Ontario

Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being

La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.

Leadership in Action – Leading for Inclusion, Anti-racism and Anti-Oppression **Salima Kassam**

An elementary principal who describes herself as anti-racist and a disrupter describes her journey in an urban middle school to create a safe, equitable and inclusive environment for its students, families and community. Her leadership narrative is rich with examples that illustrate how she enacted the practices of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) and draws on her Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) to ensure equity, learning, and well-being.

Amesbury Middle School is located within the Black Creek and Lawrence Avenue area in Toronto. Our diverse community is made up of mixed income families and dwellings, where 51% of our students earn a family income below low-income measure and 34% of our families receive social assistance. Our school is ranked 32nd on the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), a tool used within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) that ranks schools based on their socio-economic needs. As a result, our school is part of the Model Schools for Inner Cities initiative that provides additional support to ensure the academic, social emotional, health and wellness success of our students and their families.

Amesbury MS has over 273 students ranging from Grade 6 to Grade 8. Twenty-four percent of our students are born outside of Canada, with 12% of these students arriving in Canada within the last 5 years. Many of our students are from African Diasporic communities ranging from the Caribbean, South American and continental African nations. Based on TDSB's 2017 census data, 56% of our students self-identified as Black with an additional 5% self-identifying as Mixed.

We are a very racialized school as only 3% of our students self-identify as White. Alongside our significant racialized population, Amesbury MS also has a high English as a Second Language/Dialect population with 46% of our students who identify English as their primary home language. Amesbury is home to many special education programs, including classes for students with mild intellectual delay and developmental disabilities. Thirty-one percent of our student population have formally identified special education needs and we have been working this year to integrate many students into regular programs using a co-teaching model as part of the TDSB move to inclusion.

In 2018, Amesbury MS engaged in a collaborative journey to understand inclusion, anti-racism and anti-oppression using multidisciplinary approaches. The objective of this project was

1.1 Building a shared vision

to build on work done with Amesbury MS students and staff in the last two years and go deeper with an understanding of inequities that affect our students daily within the context of systemic racism, and specifically anti-Black racism and special education.

We focused on how Amesbury MS students see themselves alongside how they are perceived and treated at school and within the larger community. Our aim was to provide strategies and skills to support staff, parents/caregivers and community partners in highlighting a revised narrative of our students' brilliance regardless of how they may be labelled by data, their peers, their educators. and the larger community. We wanted to provide our students with the navigation tools required to succeed at Amesbury MS and outside as scholars, and as culturally and racially proud change agents.

2.1 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

Our Goals

The first priority goal was to deepen our collective understanding of racism by considering the following questions:

- What is racism?
- What is anti-Black racism?
- How do special education and race play out in our school and in the community?
- What might we do as educators, families/caregivers and as students at Amesbury MS to interrupt these injustices?

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

To meet this goal, we offered a series of three sessions focused on 'Race and Special Education Professional Learning.' We provided staff with an opportunity to learn from and with experienced facilitators focusing on core principles of intersections of special education and race. Facilitators who worked in collaboration with me included Dr. Gillian Parekh, Assistant Professor and Canada Research Chair in Inclusion, Disability and Education York University, and Karen Murray, centrally assigned TDSB principal for Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression and Teaching and Learning.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

2.3 Modelling the school's values and practices

The second priority goal was to develop our school-wide focus on listening to student voice by providing students with the opportunity to design and execute student-led professional learning. This entailed fostering student leadership through an anti-oppression conference that offered workshops designed and led by Amesbury MS students. The conference was aimed at our feeder schools in the area. In designing and leading the workshops, the students drew support from One Voice, One Team which is a community agency, a TDSB Student Equity Program Advisor and Amesbury staff.

How I Began ...

When I first became principal at Amesbury in October 2018, I was the 8th administrator to start in the building since the previous September and the 10th in three years. As a first step, I observed, and what stood out for me as initial observations included:

- the lack of trust in the building from staff due to a large turnover of administrators, and
- a lack of home school partnerships due to the school's location in a community where our students do not live.

What the Data Showed

As a second step, I examined some of the lagging data that was present and found the following concerning data:

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

- *Demographic*: One-third of our students were identified as students with special education needs (SEN) Disaggregating this with the data on who is identified, was alarming as it pointed to many of our young Black male students which also reflects board and province-wide data.
- *Reporting*: EQAO and report cards did not align. Learning skills for students with special education needs were consistently below average.
- *Perceptual*: Teaching did not include differentiated instruction (DI), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP). Students did not feel comfortable speaking with their teachers. They would often come to me to speak or work in the office as they did not feel welcome in their classes or were being kicked out of their classrooms if they were seen to be disruptive.

5.2 Meeting the demands for external accountability

Building Connections with the Community

In order to learn more about the community, I began spending time with students who were frequent flyers to the office to discern why they preferred working there. I also found multiple opportunities to connect with families outside of the school; for example, visiting a community run breakfast program. I also connected with families outside of their apartment buildings and encouraged communication through emails and phone calls to families.

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

I began making frequent classroom visits morning and afternoon, inviting staff to fireside chats, creating transparency of communication and my activities through a week at a glance for staff, encouraging educator led professional development, co-planning and co-teaching. With students, staff and families, I shared my vision of learning and leading with a community focused on anti-Black racism and inclusions. Part of this work involved restoring relationships with students, staff and families by modelling anti-racist and restorative talk with all key stakeholders.

1.4 Communicating the vision and goals

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents

2.3 Modelling the school's values and practices

The relationship building was critical to build trust, however, I also recognized that as a staff, there was a gap between what students and families wanted and what staff were consistently providing. I applied for the Supporting Racialized Students Grant and focused the budget on two key pieces: professional learning for staff and an opportunity for students to demonstrate their skills – both of which were focused on anti-Black racism and inclusive teaching.

3.6 Allocating resources in support of the school's vision and goals

Drawing on Support from External Experts

I also knew that I couldn't do this alone – part of creating accountability in the building was modelling what it meant to co-plan and co-lead. With the partnership of Dr. Gillian Parekh from York University and the support of the Black Students Success and Excellence (BSSE) initiative, I was able to provide a series of professional learning focused on how Black students in special education are treated in school.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

With a team of four lead teachers from our inclusion classes, we delved into how to change the physical and pedagogical conditions in our classrooms to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate what they could do, as opposed to not do. I also partnered with community organizations like the Coco Collective and One Voice One Team, our community support worker and our Student Equity Program Advisor to work with a group of interested students from Grades 6-8 to design VIBE – Voices in Black Excellence. We put on a conference focused on Black Brilliance for Grade 5 students from our feeder schools.

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

Continuing Our Inquiry

In 2019, we continued our work focusing on what inclusive classrooms look like by continuing our collaborative inquiry into how changing conditions for students in our inclusion classrooms with an intentional focus on mathematics instruction:

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

- What might we observe when we create and implement Math lessons that include Black student voice – interests, relevance, connection to historical and present issues – in our inclusion classrooms?
- How were educators centring Black student excellence as a focus in the classroom for students with Special Education needs?
- How were educators differentiating instruction as a pedagogical tool to support all students?

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

5.1 Building staff members' internal sense of accountability

With our team of educators, we focused on the conditions of teaching and learning co-created with students in order to set up a climate of high expectations that took into account Black student lived experiences. We wanted students to be able to make connections between Math content and historical/present issues, so they had the navigation skills to be able to address oppression, anti-Black racism and other forms of injustice. We also wanted them to demonstrate what they knew in Math through differentiated process and product.

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge, and systems thinking

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

Celebrating Progress with Others

In February 2020, we hosted a delegation of superintendents from the USA, who shared that as they walked through our demonstration classrooms, they noted the cultural pride and academic confidence of students and that they were unable to differentiate between students who did and did not have a special education need. They also noted the teaching and learning in classrooms, for example, students of all abilities coding and sharing their mathematical knowledge, including financial literacy.

Continuing the Learning During Lockdown

As we moved into lockdown due to the pandemic, a critical moment occurred when students reached out to me and asked if they could continue to meet with me online to talk about Voices in Black Excellence. With a group of committed teachers, parents and students, we held bi-monthly google meets and then, when it was safe to meet outside, we held physically distanced meetings. Taking the cue from students, we found ways to listen to students to share their concerns about being Black, their mental health and their desire to be seen as

4.2 Providing instructional support

whole beings during a world that had erupted in visceral racial and pandemic violence. Our group included former students who had graduated and a student who had attended our initial VIBE conference when he was in Grade 5.

September 2020 began with our continued focus on inclusion and anti-Black racism. Through intentional hiring due to some staff leaving the building for other jobs, we were able to focus our interview questions for multiple positions to include opportunities for educators to share how they would contribute to the work being done inside and outside the building.

4.1 Staffing the instructional program

Our momentum continues with students leading announcements and assemblies focused on embedded learning on Black brilliance. I also notice students taking the lead in classrooms, asking critically conscious questions of their teachers and asking for accountability through projects and assessments. Educators are continuing their work to examine how differentiating instruction is a critical component of anti-racist education and how reading and mathematics are intertwined. Part of our classroom-based resource model of inclusion includes addressing gaps in reading for our Grade 6s and Grade 7s – something we deemed necessary in the spring during lockdown.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

What I Have Noticed

We have a community of educators in the building who are focusing on their “Why” – why they do the things they do as their pedagogy and why they think it is serving all students. Educators are also more willing to engage in conversations with me about evidence of learning of anti-racist pedagogy. Educators are collaborating more and sharing best practices. Students and staff have more respectful interactions and are more willing to work together to address issues in the classrooms. Families are using the parent protocol more to address their concerns with teachers as opposed to coming directly to the Principal. More family members are attending our virtual townhalls and sharing their feedback of how we can continue to support families, mental health and focus on Black brilliance in the building.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

Launching a Book Study

Our upcoming staff learning will include a book study on *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* by Carla Shalaby, suggested by Dr. Gillian Parekh as a way to continue to support inclusion, anti-Black racism, and restorative asset-based relationships. We are also looking at how to include families in the book club.

VIBE this year will be an adaptation of a TED X conference with students, staff and family members speaking about the intersection of anti-Black racism and mental health. And we will have two collaborative inquiries focused on differentiated instruction in reading and mathematics.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

We are a work-in-progress still – there remain questions from all stake holders about why we focus on anti-Black racism. We continue to work on putting theory into practice more

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy,

consistently across all classrooms. And we have had to change some of our practices due to the pandemic.

However, as a leader, I am proud of where we started and where we have come. Our leading data demonstrates a change in how learning skills and reporting data are being collected. Perceptual data show more joy and more laughter between adults, between students and adults, and with families. There is more openness in communication among and between stakeholders. Students are advocating for themselves more and are being listened to more. When I am not able to get to all classrooms consistently, it is noticed and no longer something that causes immediate distress! There are less visits to the office by students and more visits to the office by staff just to share ideas, thoughts and laughs.

Social Personal
Leadership Resources
(PLRs) – Perceiving
Emotions, Managing
Emotions, and Acting
in Emotionally
Appropriate Ways

We now have Amesbury swag as a way to share our Amesbury pride. Families are sharing with me how much they appreciate the inclusive environment at Amesbury and their appreciation of a clear anti-racist stance.

NOTE: You may be interested in listening to Salima’s podcast ‘Why are You in Education?’ on Wholehearted Teaching with Adrian Del Monte at [WHY ARE YOU IN EDUCATION?? with TDSB Principal, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Disrupter, Salima Kassam \(buzzsprout.com\)](https://www.buzzsprout.com/1234567890/podcasts/1234567890/episodes/1234567890)

In this podcast, Salima reveals her passion as an education leader and shows that she is willing to do absolutely anything for her students. She is an anti-racist and a disrupter. She points out that anti-racism is not a lens but rather a stance. She explains that “lenses you can take on and off when it suits you” whereas “a stance embodies who you are.” For her, anti-racist work is mind, body, spirit, and soul – it’s work, it’s labour, it’s hard but it’s necessary.” Importantly, Salima reminds us that true anti-racism work requires genuine action and not just talking about the problems. She gives us many suggestions for how we can become anti-racist starting immediately. Her action-oriented message is one that sticks.

Follow Salima on Twitter @KassamSalima