

Vidya Shah ([00:00:01](#)):

Hello and welcome. My name is Dr. Vidya Shah and I'm an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Welcome to another episode of the UnLeading project. UnLeading asks, what might it mean to undo and unlearn practices and ideas that promote hierarchy, individualism, compliance, power over silence and a culture of fear. It also asks how might we reclaim and re-imagine future possibilities for leadership that create radically different possibilities for schooling. This podcast series will highlight voices of leaders in classrooms, communities, homes, schools, school districts and beyond. We fully affirm leadership in all spaces and aim to disrupt any elitist and hierarchical notions of leadership in education or the idea that the sole dominion of leadership exists with administrators and with school district leaders. That's why I'm really excited about our conversation today. Our podcast is on community centered leadership, featuring dynamic community leaders that are influencing, that are disrupting and that are transforming schooling. For their full bios and contact information please check out the UnLeading webpage [www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading](http://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading). We explore questions such as, how are communities constructed differently based on identities and power? What does it mean to lead in and with community? What can we learn from leaders and leadership in communities that challenges traditional notions and offers new possibilities? In each of our podcasts, we begin with a speaker who helps us to frame the discussion to explore tensions and to pose questions, thereby extending our thinking. On today's podcast we have the amazing Neethan Shan, longtime community activist and advocate and currently the Executive Director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. Neethan will take some time to help us make sense of these ideas. Welcome Neethan.

Neethan Shan ([00:02:27](#)):

Thank you, Vidya, thank you very much for having me here today. It's a pleasure to be having this conversation because it's long overdue. There are some words in our vocabulary that is often only seen as positive and leadership is one of them. We don't often question the term and how the term is used, how the term is perceived, how leaders are celebrated and acknowledged and so on. I think breaking down what leadership currently looks like, what are some of the issues surrounding educational leadership and the nuances to it, it's a critical conversation. I've almost had a 360 type of intersection with the school system education system. I came as a refugee youth at the age of 16, fleeing a genocide in my homeland with my sister who was only a couple of years older than me. As an unaccompanied minor in the school system and then went on to become a youth worker who worked in number of schools, and became a high school teacher, then taught for a bit and became a school board trustee for a bit in two school boards, and work at an organization that is doing educational policy. But most importantly, now I'm a father of two children in the education system. It is like a full 360 interaction with the system and I have to say, frankly, regardless of which intersection or which way I entered the system, it was never positive. Every part of those interactions have been very challenging and there are different types of challenges that in fact, I will say being a parent is probably the most challenging part of all of these identities that I've had intersections, I've had with the system. My role is not necessarily to answer questions, maybe pose more questions so the amazing panel that will come later to talk. When we talk about educational leadership, even in the academia, when they have those PhD programs and so on, it's very centred around individuals, very centred around positions they hold, rather than the kind of impact they can have. It's often the senior superintendents, administrators, the trustees, but the emotional, physical and intellectual labour of the community that actually makes these schools function is completely ignored, not acknowledged and often not seen in the view of leadership. That has to change and that has to change, not just because that's the right thing to do, that's the most effective thing to do. If you feel schools are spaces and education system is space to remove inequities, to change a society, the way we operate with a very Eurocentric, individualized, male-centric leadership models

within the system are very inadequate. So what happens is communities get to be seen as something that needs to be managed in the system rather than engaged. It's often about who are the problem people, how do we keep them away? How do we keep them speaking less? How do we keep them coming less to the school? How do we manage our PR, how do we manage not having a lawsuit and conflict is often seen as a problem. Often the most amount of time is spent on trying to not necessarily address issues or hide issues and so on. I think that is the biggest issue and that is happening because leadership is centred around people who are putting their loyalty to the system or career-based decisions as opposed to community based decisions. I think one of our challenges is that people who do the hard work, community members are often profiled, often kept away. In fact, the system does a good divide and conquer kind of structures, where they would have parents from the communities who are adopting to a Eurocentric, White supremacy type models to be the people that have spaces and the people who challenged them become a problem. I also want to highlight that community is not really outside the school. There is a community inside the school. TDSB's population is bigger than some of the city's population in Canada, the student population alone. Often those young people are not necessarily acknowledged to be part of a community or a community. What we see is a very individualized celebration of leadership when somebody gets an award or marks or something like that, but collectively young people are not provided the space to articulate their leadership together. Often not given the space as to collectively organize around issues that they face because there's a heavy surveillance of, if they're gathered together to have a discussion on a policy or things there's often criminalization and surveillance on our young people. Even within the schools, the community itself, the young people who are part of the community are suffering this marginalizations. I think the whole picture of how we perceive leadership within the system has to change and how we attribute leadership qualities to individuals rather than communities that have by far been the main agents of change has to be accounted for. Despite all this, we are seeing phenomenal amount of leadership from the community, whether it be, parents of Black children in York Region and York Region groups, where they'd be Advocacy Peel and other parent groups in Peel Region. All of these communities have and parents particularly, from the Black community, have been able to still, despite all of these challenges, despite the Eurocentric nature and the selective divide and conquer type tactics of the systems, have been able to make an impact. I think that is where if these community leaders who are making this impact, despite all of these challenges, if the system was actually able to open up and engage them in a proactive way, imagine the amount of impact that we would see. Each of those successes, each of those milestones are coming, despite many, many barriers placed on them. I think when we talk about community centered leadership, it's important to recognize that the community that needs to be centered is not currently centered. In fact, sometimes some of these models that exist that makes it seem like they're centered, for example, the parent council meetings and some of those things are very tokenistic. They are predominantly for pizza sales and fundraising and so on. The actual parents who need to be there are often given trespassing tickets because they don't want to hear from people. The agenda is set by the administrators, they wouldn't accept it, but agenda is definitely set by administrators running the show. The only thing I will leave at the end is that even within the community, there are differences. It's very important to recognize it's not a monolithic or essentialized concept that community centered leadership because that has not worked for us. Most times we might find that the people that are chosen to be in at these tables are often handpicked as people who would appease the system, who would be benefiting from being attached to the system. That often leads to people who are racialized or who are from the BIPOC communities often not necessarily reflecting the challenges we have. What ends up happening is that our communities have to fight at two levels, one within the system and also the people who are social butterflies who want to be at 10 different committees and carry all those police pins on their jackets and so on. They become these celebrated people and streets get named after them, roads get named after them. At the end of the day, the people who did the hard labour of putting up a fight

against racism are often left as unsung heroes and sheroes. I'll leave it as that and I'm looking forward to hearing from this amazing panel that you've assembled today.

Vidya Shah ([00:09:55](#)):

Oh, Neethan, thank you so much. First of all, just sharing your stories, but also for naming the tremendous emotional and physical and intellectual labour of communities. This idea that particular members of communities get chosen by school boards or get approved by school boards to quote unquote, participate or be engaged, and the ways in which folks that are challenging or that are asking questions or that are simply holding the board to account often get demonized and often get ostracized. Such important points. Thank you so much for setting that tone for us and for really helping us think through the framing of today's conversation. We have an amazing panel to extend this conversation, to talk about their own experiences in and with community. I'd like to welcome first off, Ahona Mehdi. Welcome, Ahona.

Ahona Mehdi ([00:10:43](#)):

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Vidya Shah ([00:10:46](#)):

And welcome Charline Grant.

Charline Grant ([00:10:48](#)):

Thank you, Vidya, thank you so much for inviting me to this space.

Vidya Shah ([00:10:52](#)):

So happy you're both here. Sylvia Maracle, welcome to the podcast.

Sylvia Maracle ([00:10:55](#)):

Greetings to all of you, I'm glad to be here.

Vidya Shah ([00:10:59](#)):

And Leroi Newbold, welcome.

LeRoi Newbold ([00:11:01](#)):

Thank you for having me.

Vidya Shah ([00:11:04](#)):

And last, but certainly not least, Diana Grimaldos, welcome.

Diana Grimaldos ([00:11:08](#)):

¡Hola! Thank you so much Vidya.

Vidya Shah ([00:11:11](#)):

So folks, we're going to dive into some important questions and I think what I'd love to do first is to just have the listeners get a sense of who you are and how you come to this work. I'll pose this question to

each of you and hopefully you can sort of situate yourselves in the conversation. Given your identities and connections to community work, what does community centered leadership look like in your everyday practice? Sylvia, maybe we'll start with you.

Sylvia Maracle ([00:11:40](#)):

I'm a Mohawk from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territories and I'm one of 62 grandchildren. My one grandfather went to residential school and my grandmother was taken away from her home community so they wouldn't take her away to school. She never learned to read and write and she had a memory that would amaze you because she couldn't write it down and she couldn't read it. It also meant that people had to interact with her physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to be able to get her knowledge or to transfer knowledge. I came to Ryerson to study journalism and got involved in urban Indigenous organizations. And as a younger person was very much involved in what was called a Wandering Spirit Survival School. Obviously residential school and obviously learning about Dick and Jane and European concepts did not do well for us. Really we, led me to a career where we have challenged the system in as many ways as we can. One of the things that I want to talk about is, we have 11 secondary schools that are operated in our friendship centers around the province. These are for people who we refer to as were pushed out of school. They're too big, they're too Brown, they want to talk back, they don't want to get up in the morning. All kinds of reasons that the system prescribes how we're to behave from 9 until 3:30 or 4:00. We've gathered them all up in it. Sometimes there are only 700 in these 11 schools, sometimes there's over 1,000 and our commitment to them is that as much as we can, we will replace 'em. We will not replicate the system that they will be successful. To us, we don't care if a school board says, well, you can't have them in school longer than 21. We go, actually we can and we will. You should make your public statement if you're going to make it and they always back off because we'll just say, you're just doing residential school in a different process. They may not live here, but you're still trying to control them.

Sylvia Maracle ([00:14:30](#)):

The other thing that we do in their lives, I think that challenges, the status quo is we're very conscious of racism, but we're also very conscious of sexism. That lots of the behaviours that we've learned has destroyed some of our matriarchs. We want to see a re-matriation occur. We want to see women taking on leadership roles speaking out, we also want to address the issue of homophobia, 2SLGBTQIA, young people are encouraged and supported. They may not be in their parental home and they may be other places, so they need other kinds of support. The last thing that I want to talk about at this moment is to talk about we really replace the curricula. So you can do art if you wish, but you can make moccasins as part of your project. We're not going to construct it, so there's a lot of relationship building individually with students, a lot of very soft mentoring that happens. As much as we can, they structure what it's going to be like. We periodically take teachers from a board, but they have to go through our interviews and on our hiring and deal with our sort of community agencies. For us, it's about reinventing the wheel because we have a long history, which is well-documented that mainstream structures don't work for us, that in fact, they've harmed us and destroyed our quality of life. It is a process in community. We can work with others, we can work with the school boards, somewhat, but our community-based leadership is the one who has to step in and be all things to these young people. We refer to them as this is where your aunties always knew what was going on. We have done some studies of the work that we do and we have attached some research and we have something called a ceremony and transition "CAT". And we ask young people, what are the kinds of things that help them and make it successful that doesn't exist in the system. They've talked to us about our culture and celebrating our culture, in appropriate ways, whether it's seasons or relationships or teachings or not learning English or French, learning your

own Indigenous language. All of these are kinds of things that have come from community leadership and that the young people themselves have a stake in. I say to the province when we graduate a couple of hundred them every year, that I have a 2000% increase over you because they all failed in your system. Every time we're turning out and many of them go on to post-secondary and come back in very formal roles in leadership in our community.

Vidya Shah ([00:18:08](#)):

Sylvia, thank you so much for sharing those examples and really for your tremendous work with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centers. It has been a leading organization for so many other organizations to look to for what community centered work and leadership looks like. So thank you, thank you for being here. Let's go next to Charline. Charline, did you want to share sort of in thinking about your identities and connections to community, what does community centered leadership look like to you in your everyday practice?

Charline Grant ([00:18:40](#)):

So I am one of the co-founders of Parents of Black Children. It came out of a need just like many of these organizations, based on what we were witnessing and experiencing through eyes of our children and just how they were being attacked in the school system. My own journey navigating the system for my oldest son, who is now 19, I wasn't prepared for what he was experiencing. I'll be honest with you. I had no idea. And this little boy tried to tell me in grade two, Mom, they treat me differently. I remember the first time I heard it, I grabbed him and I hugged him cause I'm like, what do you mean they treat you differently? No, don't say that. The concept and the idea that an educator would treat a child differently because of the colour of his skin. I never get used to it. To this day it angers me, I still get to see it. I still get to experience it through other children that I support. When I started, I say to this day, the world is blessed that I became a mother because the love I have for my children is why I work the way that I work. Everything I do is centered around them and to make the place that they are and the space that they're going to walk in better. And I'm unapologetic about it, I don't need to be polite. I don't need to be complacent. It's all about dismantling the system. I have no interest in disrupting any system because when you were creating that system, nobody looked like me and was at those tables. So, you don't get to tell me after you've been racist against my children, you might get away with it with me, I'll be honest. But the fact that my children are here is the reason why I do the work that I do.

Charline Grant ([00:20:44](#)):

When I was approached about Parents of Black Children, and I'm like, it's a parent group. Who could deny a parent. At the end of the day, if you close your eyes and you hear what I'm doing for the protection of my children, regardless of who you are, it should hit you because if you're a parent and if you're not a parent, if you're a decent human being, it should hit you because it's the safety. Everything we do with Parents of Black Children is deliberate. It's rooted in strategy, it's all intentional and it's all about disrupting the system. We have chosen education because that is the first time our babies leave our arms. As young as three years old for those children who are born like myself and my son after September, you start school at a very young age. When I go in and I hear a child, say a three-year old, might be the tallest, birthday is in December and say my teacher never smiles with me. I think she doesn't like me. Everytime I look at her, I ask a question, but when she looks at me her face is serious. For me, and the work that we do, it is so personal. It is so personal. We go in spaces every day to support our families and help them. The leadership I see that are on the sunshine list, getting paid millions every year, I see, you can't even escape it. It rarely looks like me, they're being paid these high incomes to abuse my children. So you don't get to tell me what leadership looks like. But the thing with Black

mothers, cause usually we're the first on the front lines fighting, we get erased out of history, we are targeted, we are ostracized, we are silent and we are demonized just for being mothers and standing up for our children. So one of the things that was part of our fibre and Parents of Black Children we weren't going to allow that to happen. When we go in and we get the call, by the time a parent gets to Parents of Black Children, it's a nine one one call, it's crisis mode. Today, like I was late coming on the call, but today was a very hard day for me. When I think about community work and community leadership and what we do, my day started at nine defending an eight year old. These stories are real. For me, it's good when I could tell these stories. The Toronto Catholic District School Board and what it did for me, I think, when the mom reached out to me, I think she said two sentences and that's all I needed last Saturday. I made all the calls and we had a meeting today at nine o'clock, eight years old. He's already had more suspensions than birthdays on the face of this earth. What? The only reason why he hasn't had any suspension in grade three, cause he's in grade three now, is because Steven Lecee banned suspension from kindergarten to grade three. Unless somebody has been living under a rock for the last year, everyone at this point knows calling the police on a Black person is a matter of life and death. This little boy has had the cops called on him three times in grade three.

Charline Grant ([00:24:11](#)):

The only reason why, and you know, I don't take for me, it's not power. I say it every day, I'm not interested in working in partnership with any school boards. I'm not your friend and I don't seek to be your friend. I don't care if you like me, but you're going to respect our children. One of the things that just so happen and I saw something and I'm watching it last night. It hit me, the Catholic system has a history. We're seeing what they have done, the Catholic School Board with the residential school, and I know Sylvia mentioned it. One of the statements that stood out to me is it's like, they're trying to kill the Indian in the child. What I see happening to our Black families and the Catholic School Board is another form of residential schooling. It's like they're killing the Black in our children. It hit me, cause I had two meetings with two separate Catholic Boards, and for some reason our men, our little boys, our babies are attacked as early as kindergarten. They don't even know what's hitting them. This little boy through his support system, through his therapist said his goal, his goal at eight years old, I don't know if I can say this without even crying, his goal at eight years old is to say, I want to be better so they could like me. How do you do that? To be on a call and nobody denied that this happened cause they agreed to it. But they were only willing to do resolution because Parents of Black Children was on that call. I thought to myself, there was many meetings with this little boy for the last three years and the things that they were asking for and the support that he needed nobody thought, nobody wanted to help this family. It's when I think about community and the importance of the work that we do, it's to another level because for us, it's survival. Somebody in that school system thought at six years old, they would put the child on a school bus, take him 40 kilometers from his home and when they called mom and mom is working on the front line to save all of us from COVID, and when she couldn't get there, they called the police child abandonment. If that is not child abuse, I don't know what is. Think about what that child will grow up to. Then, if they grow up and they happen to make it out of the school system and they make it into society and they just the way that they look at themselves after that, then we blame parenting?

Charline Grant ([00:27:06](#)):

For us, it's a matter of survival. It's a matter of you are there and you're not doing what you're paid to do. We're going to make you do it, whatever that looks like we're going to make you do it. We're going to empower parents to be able to do this work for themselves and duplicate it. For us, not only are we work in the GTA, it's all across Canada because one thing we have realized that we've gotten calls from as far away as the UK and at least five other places in United States. We know when you close your eyes,

regardless of where our children are, it's the same experience. Is it our children? We're not interested in programs cause programs tell us that the children are the problem and they're not. They didn't create the system. The only time we want to work with you is when that means stopping you from abusing our children, prevention. And when we say defund, we talk about defunding and everybody get nervous and crazy when we ask to have police removed out of school. What about you do prevention? Our work has taken us into CAS and the more the work takes us in different institution we realize how every system is set up against us. When I think of CAS, the fact that even if it's a trite complaint, even though it's a closed file, it stays against our family for 99 years. It follows them generational. This whole leadership in what we do, I can't say it anymore, it's survival. It is a lot of pivoting, it's a lot of, we want our children to experience education, free from oppression, free from harassment, free from abuse, free from racism. We want educators to see our children. Your job is to educate, your job is to see our children, not what you view them to be, not what you think they are. See them as humans, see them as children and educate them. That's all we ask because they belong. You get a certain amount of funding for our children so educate them. Don't educate who you think they are and don't police them based on it, educate the person that's sitting in front of you. That is what we push for in every institution that we deal with and every school board. For us, we realize it's not a school board problem, it's the provincial problem, it's a federal problem. It's all across this country. We need to reform this education system for our children to not survive, we're tired of just surviving. We want to stem to strive like everyone else.

Vidya Shah ([00:30:04](#)):

Thank you so much, Charlene. And again, for the tremendous work that you all are doing at Parents of Black Children and that you've been doing long before Parents of Black Children. Thank you, thank you for sharing and for really speaking to the fact that this leadership as survival, I think is a really important part of this conversation. Thank you so much for sharing that. Ahona, really interested in your thoughts on this. What does community centered leadership look like for you?

Ahona Mehdi ([00:30:35](#)):

I'm 18 years old so I have a lot to learn from people in this space as well, but to me, I just finished high school last year through which I was a student trustee for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. Through that, I experienced and witnessed a lot of anti-Black racism, a lot of anti-Indigenous racism, Islamophobia, ableism among the board of trustees who were making high level policy decisions on behalf of these children. Kind of where my community leadership journey started was working to terminate the Hamilton police liaison program. I worked on this alongside community organizers within Hamilton, Black community organizers, Indigenous community organizers because it's similar to what Vidya said and what Neethan said a lot of the times like academics, politicians, these people with big names want to take credit for the changes that are happening within the education system when it is children, it's youth, it's Black youth, it's Indigenous youth, it's racialized youth who are at the very root of this work. When we got the police liaison program terminated it was because no trustee at the board table, no adult trustee who was elected to represent students and their families, no trustee asked for the termination of the program. It was myself as a student trustee and youth within the community. I think community leadership, it's not very much recognized. It's not something that's seen as real. I think it's something that's very much romanticized. It's kind of like community leaders are invisible in a lot of ways. When I worked with community members to terminate the police liaison program, I say a lot that when you disrupt, you find community and community finds you. That's how I kind of got involved with Hamilton Students For Justice, with Defund HPS, both of those coalitions that I'm a member of. And through that, I say a lot also that community leadership looks like co-learning, it looks like creating spaces of healing among one another, even when calling for the defunding of police in Hamilton and

calling for the reallocation of funding towards free housing in Hamilton, we sat outside of city hall for two weeks in the cold, calling for defunding, calling for free housing. It wasn't just that we were there on our own, unhoused members of the community came and sat with us and created community with us. We've created this consistent network of community where we're working as community with community for community, and that's the same thing that applies to student spaces. We're working as students with students, for students. That's kind of like what I go by and the work that I do.

Ahona Mehdi ([00:33:44](#)):

I think ultimately it's not about individualization, it's about a collective and it's about being together and healing and loving collectively together. I think on a day to day and within my everyday and within the daily lives of organizers that I work with, community leadership, community centered leadership looks really different each and every day. Sometimes it's going to look like being with one another and sometimes it's going to look like healing and sometimes it's going to look like trauma, and sometimes it's gonna look like needing to take a step back. It does change from day to day because these aren't really positions that students and youth should have to be in. Youth should not have to advocate for police-free schools because they're seeing their friends being handcuffed, placed in the back of police cruisers, carded, wrongfully criminalized. As students, as young people, as youth it's not something that we should be doing, it's not natural that we're doing it. A lot of the time community centered leadership is painted as something like in the movies where it's just like a revolution and that's it or it's just beautiful and no one's traumatized and everyone's strong and unbreakable. We're kind of sometimes in this place where we're either put on a pedestal or we're gaslit and those are the two things that we kind of can experience. I think there is a lot of credit due to organizers, there's a lot of credit due to community leaders, but I think with that, we have to recognize that there is a lot of trauma within the every day. For me right now, community leadership looks like taking time for myself because I know that community loves me and I love community and that's what I need to do for myself. Community leadership a while ago looks like me calling out the school board and then it looks like me being hospitalized and me having a mental health crisis and that kind of thing. I think there are a lot of different lenses that we have to look at it through, it's not just something that can be romanticized or something that can allow people and people in general to put organizers on a pedestal or it's not something that causes people to be unbreakable and just undevotedly strong and fearless. There are a lot of lenses to look at it through, but at the end of the day, community centered leadership does look like love and healing and collective struggle, and we do it for each other and we do it for ourselves.

Vidya Shah ([00:36:25](#)):

Thank you so much, Ahona and thank you for naming the reality and the daily struggles that accompany the tremendous work that's happening. So important, thank you for sharing that. Oh, my heart is full. LeRoi, welcome, thoughts on this question.

LeRoi Newbold ([00:36:47](#)):

I come to this work as a Black transgender person. Growing up, I experienced what Black kids being pushed out of school and policed looks like in my own family. I also come to this work as a parent needing to see another reality for my children. For me, community centered leadership means that Black kids and Black parents are the leaders of Black education because community centered leadership is connected to community self-determination and the idea that communities should have control and agency over our own education. To me, in a proper educational setting, Black kids are the first leaders and Black parents are also the leaders because of the way we love our children, the way we know our children, the way we seek protection for them, our task of working with our children to find purpose, to

find freedom and to serve each other. In a community setting like Freedom School, community centered leadership means that the adults don't get to decide on the curriculum or the pedagogy simply because we have a certain qualification or we have credentials. We can only work on setting curriculum once we know what the kids want to learn about, what they're going through, what they need to fight back in the political reality that they live in, what they need to heal and what they need to be okay. We can only know how to facilitate the curriculum by responding to what engages them, how they learn and what they need to find justice. For my everyday practice of community centered leadership, it means being in community, learning to heal and liberate myself and challenging myself to deconstruct my beliefs based on how I was taught in school. It means showing up for other Black parents, accompanying people to court dates, getting on calls with CAS, showing up to fight against suspensions, making sure the suspensions get ripped up once they're thrown out and it also means listening to my kids about who they are, being able to see their gifts and their talents and fighting for them to be treated with love and respect. It means fighting for police free schools, it means fighting for mandatory Black curriculum in Ontario and sometimes it means creating a building outside of the school system, building other alternatives.

Vidya Shah ([00:39:25](#)):

LeRoi, thank you so much and for centering the importance of building outside and other alternatives, I think is such an important piece and listening to, and building curriculum and experiences around the children and their interests and their needs. I love what you said about what they need to be political and fight is so important for the tremendous work that you do at Freedom School and elsewhere. Thank you, thank you. And welcome, Diana.

Diana Grimaldos ([00:39:53](#)):

Thank you, Vidya. Wow, so many beautiful and inspiring ways of leading. I come into this work wearing different hats, but at the same time coming from different experiences. I'm a Latinx mom, proud mom of two young children who immigrated to Canada when I was very young. My work in Colombia was to work with teachers to understand children's rights, to be able to identify them as rights within the school system. Neethan was talking about a 360 and I think I've done that. So 20 years ago, I was in Colombia talking to teachers and being able to talk about how violence was impacting children's education and I remember back in the days, my thesis was to ask children how they play and the games that kids were playing were about being police officers and using sticks to be guns. Today has been a very emotional day because Colombia is in crisis and it's really hard as an advocate, as an activist, as a human right advocate it's really hard to take away your hats all the time. The advocacy work never ends, you breathe with it, you live with it in everyday, you're breathing that. I came into this work of education again in the Canadian system realizing that even though I come from a very different governance model of education, the injustices and inequities are still the same, the barriers that children face and the perpetrators and the systemic barriers that they have they're facing are the same, the neoliberalism in which the history of the colonialism impacts are everywhere in Canada and Colombia and South America, everywhere. It is not different. What's different is how do we go about it. How do we approach it? To me, community centered leadership is being able to bring the voices of those people that are often forgotten. I currently develop a curriculum for parents to support them in navigating the system. It is full of jargon, it doesn't matter if you speak English or not, it doesn't matter if you come from another country or not. It is a complex system that it is not welcoming, especially, it's not welcoming for people that speak like me with an accent or people who look like me, Black parents, Indigenous parents. I am disrupting the system in school councils. I think it's a very important space for power. Part of my work is informing racialized parents and supporting them in their journey of navigating the spaces that are spaces for White parents

to use their power and use their positionality of colonialism of a policy that is created for parent engagement in the way that the system wants us to engage. We're disrupting that by telling parents and bringing people like Parents of Black Children to share their experiences, to share the work that they've been doing and highlighting the different ways in which leadership operates from the ground. I'm telling parents to identify racism when they see it because unfortunately for a lot of immigrant newcomers in racialized bodies, this means we don't realize when it's happening, the microaggressions. We are so grateful that we are in Canada and that we are not as scared of the civil war that is happening right now in Colombia, but I'm grateful that I have a free education or that I have a roof over my head. When you put that into perspective, it really changes the narrative for people to realize in that they can be discriminated against in a system that has welcomed them. I put welcoming in brackets because we have different realities and people don't really understand the way in which immigrants and refugees and people with that status face in the everyday. The schools are places where this discrimination and racism happen everyday, their families that they don't know that they can actually access the school if they don't have a status and they have to come to us, to community centers or they have to go to someone who can speak for them and remind them that they actually can.

Diana Grimaldos ([00:45:23](#)):

So, my leadership goes from working with the community and I also, I'm working as a scholar writing those experiences and changing the narrative of how the leadership can be seen. Who are those leaders? Who are those parents who are for, that Black parents that are fighting to disrupt the system? Those are the Sheroes, they are really shifting the narrative in Ontario. For me, it is so important to highlight those stories. Also, part of the other work that I do at a policy level is I worked with a coalition I worked for CASE, which is the Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education. One of the policies that we had been working for over six years, it has been to eliminate streaming as a practicing Ontario act. Last year in September, Minister Leece announced that we are going to be stopping de-streaming and what people hear is that de-streaming is happening, but it isn't happening because in order to end de-streaming, we have to change completely the system. We have to change the curriculum, we have to change the way we are teaching teachers. We have 80% of White teachers in the educational system. It needs to stop, the streaming needs to end. What we're doing is bringing scholars, bringing parents, bringing advocating, a researcher into the conversation of how does de-streaming need to happen efficiently. You just don't end streaming in grade nine math and then you think that the problem is over. What about the other subjects? Streaming starts in kindergarten and Charline has highlighted how it happens. It happens because of systemic oppression, it happens because of racism, it happens because of the biases. It's not because we have a subject that says you can do applied and academic, it's not just that it's more than that. When we understand that our children are being put in a box just because of the emotional development, we're using social, emotional learning to give a grade to a three year old and a four year old. My daughter also started at three years old at school and when I knew that what she was going through, I really start having anxiety and panic attacks. And Ahona, what you said is so true, our mental health is on the line every day because we, as advocates and activists, we don't stop and we never put the community aside. When we truly lead with community, it means that you are working with the community and the work is personal, but it's never individual. And if it is individual then it's not social justice.

Vidya Shah ([00:48:14](#)):

Diana, thank you so much, thank you so much and thank you for bringing in the international connections that community doesn't end at these fake borders that we have created in our lands, that they span multiple spaces. And, to the importance of community and continuing to challenge and push

for perceived changes like de-streaming in Ontario, it's really community that has been pushing and saying, this is actually not de-streaming. You need to rethink this from pre-kindergarten up. Thank you for the tremendous work that you're doing with CASE and all of the other spaces that you're in in community. Thank you. Sylvia, I know you wanted to add to the conversation.

Sylvia Maracle ([00:48:59](#)):

If I could, one of the things that disturbs me greatly is the degree of violence that people in formalized education structures face. I'm really talking about, you know, you're all talking as parents and parents are probably the most important advocate, but there are lots of kids out there who don't have parents, for all kinds of reasons. I think it's important that if we could deal with violence, whether it's lateral violence or sexual or assault or any of these things, a police state, why do police have to come to schools? I mean, they don't have to, right and there are processes that some of our schools use where you have peacekeepers people whose job it is to sort of mediate situations before they get out of hand. What I wanted to mention, and cause I think we're talking around it is tinkering with the system isn't going to result in the vision I see emerging. You're talking about what are the oldest colonial structures from wherever in the world you came from, there were certain groups that went out and decided certain things and that's the issue. The issue is if we don't find and it's everything, and you've already talked about everything, you know, it's teachers, it's principals, it's school boards, it's burning our young people out in social activism. The question, I think the fundamental question about community, by the way, I love the word erasure because that's what they're doing there. We're going through an assembly line and we're supposed to come out at the end the same way, but we don't go into it the same way. There's no way we can come out of it all the same. For us, you heard into the national inquiry. What we're looking for in all aspects of our life is a return to power and place. We don't want to tinker with the system. The system must change, but we should not have to do all the changes and you have to do all of that on top of what you're doing. I just wanted to emphasize that the notion of community leadership is you can let little pieces of it happen here or there, and one day somebody will look up and there'll be all those little pieces everywhere. That will be the new mosaic for education.

Vidya Shah ([00:51:52](#)):

Such an important point, Sylvia, thank you so much for sharing. When we think about and you all have named such important points and such important tensions in this work. I think as well about the possibilities that might emerge from this work. In part, I think about this ongoing conversation of reform or abolition and those inside institutional spaces often have one way of thinking about it and those outside institutional spaces often have a different way of thinking about it, but as we think about possibilities for this work going forward, are there any thoughts that you have on what those possibilities might look like and whether there are ways to think about additional options, in addition to the conversation around reform and abolition. So I'll just put those out as questions that I'm thinking about. Charline, I'd love to hear your thoughts on what possibilities emerge from community centered leadership.

Charline Grant ([00:52:59](#)):

When I think about the education system, as it stands right now, it is not working. Things have changed. The way we educate, education was developed, has drastically changed. I mean, we see that even over COVID. The way the system is set up right now and the way it's treating our Black kids, talk about Black kids, it has to be reformed. It has to be totally dismantled and rebuilt. There has to be a way to look at each and every aspect of it and build it back, from an equity lens, with equity at the forefront, not equality, but with equity at the forefront, giving everybody that opportunity. What that looks like

sometimes is, in order to right a wrong, especially when there's racism at the forefront and I go through this with institutions all the time. If you are having a racial experience and you call them to complain and tell them what your experience that you have, they try to customer service you. They try to use customer service to remedy a racial attack and it doesn't work. In order to deal with a complaint or deal with, or remedy that situation of racism in education, you definitely have to make reparation, healing, atonement, all that has to be, all that has to be wrapped up. And I liken it onto COVID, how we've seen this crisis approach to combat COVID and the vaccine and how purses got open policies went out the door. Policies has always used to harm us, I've never seen the policies that work for us because even when we know them, we try to utilize our own policies, and I know you're a policy person Vidya, we talk about policies always. It's always used as a barrier for systemic change and use as a weapon against us. When I think of the education system, there has to be a provincial, if not a federal strategy in combatting anti-Black racism, the same exact way we see they do it for COVID. Where it's we see, we have three vaccines, maybe even four, if you count Johnson and Johnson, right, and we see how money was flowing while they work on the policies and how things happen. When I think of the education system and how to reform it, you definitely have to provide the group or groups, I would say groups that you have harmed, you have to be able to make them hold in one way or another. When I look at that, somebody said it, I think Diana said it, that when you think of the amount of White teachers that we have, that are teaching, think of the GTA, are teaching our children and White leaders. It doesn't even match the.

New Speaker ([00:56:11](#)):

community that they serve. That has to be corrected. The fact that you have removed me or I wouldn't only say remove, you didn't include me. To not include me is to deny me and deny that experience and to deny what contributions were made and as ugly as the truth is, and as uncomfortable as it is that needs to be in the education system. It needs to be part of it. Everyone needs to be aware of it and that is not there. When we think about de-streaming and I have championed this, I mean, we gave Lecce a breakdown of the bandaid solution he provided last September as to, it didn't go far enough. Our children are not even, not even being tested. Most of these teachers don't even know what a gifted Black student looks like. How could they? What we have now is not acceptable. When I think about the system on a whole, every system, if they want to dismantle it, and they know how to, they can't expect us to come up with all the answers, it has to be the same way they tackled COVID. It has to be crisis, crisis, crisis approach. That's how you do it because it is the house that's on fire that needs all the water at this point. It's us, it's systemic racism, it is what's happening and it's hurting us every angle, everywhere we turn in society.

Vidya Shah ([00:57:35](#)):

Thank you, Charline. Oh, thank you, thank you for sharing that. Another question that's sort of coming up as this idea of how does community centered leadership disrupt our ideas of schooling and leadership, and what challenges do you face as leaders in leading from that standpoint? LeRoi, we'll begin with you.

LeRoi Newbold ([00:58:02](#)):

Well, I always find the word leadership even in and of itself to be weird. When I was growing up, I learned that when you're a child, you go to school, you learn so you can get a good education. I learned this narrative that if you don't like the way things are, then when you grow up, you'll be able to change things. Maybe you can get a good job that'll enable you to have power so you can lead others. As a kid, because of that, I didn't think that I had any power to change things and I didn't learn, at least at school, about the power of disruption and the power of talking back, the power of shutting down streets. In fact,

when I was a kid, I didn't talk at school at all. I was completely silent. When I did start talking around 12, 13, I started getting in trouble and at schools, the teachers didn't teach anything that was related to my life. The teachers and principals didn't look like me. They didn't know me. They didn't ask me what I wanted to learn about. Community centered leadership disrupts this because it's about Black children and Black parents having power to control education. It's about community shaping together what learning should look like. Community centered learning means, instead of learning in the classroom, we have Balls, we vogue, we protest, we have plays, we make medicine, we designed disability-justice, playground equipment. Part of community centered leadership to me is also community organizing. I don't think you can be a leader in Black education if you don't fight to abolish police, if you don't show up when Black kids are getting kicked out of school for having Afros and having locks. If you don't speak up when kids are getting called the N word at school, if you don't say anything, when black transgender children are being bullied. The challenges that I face in terms of this, I guess, are within myself and outside of myself. It's a lot of things that I have to unlearn in terms of how I parent and how I teach. When you work in a system it's harder because systems allocate power based on capitalist meritocracy and give out cookies for ability to conform and make it through in a system. To practice community based leadership I think you need to be accountable to the kids and the parents rather than to your boss. You need to refuse to suspend, refuse to report and really listen to and be guided by the kid and the parents.

Vidya Shah ([01:00:52](#)):

Thank you, LeRoi, thank you for that. Ahona, did you want to add on to that?

Ahona Mehdi ([01:00:57](#)):

Yeah, definitely. I think in terms of community centered leadership, I think something great about it is that it's something that enables organizers and community leaders to be seen as people that academics can learn from, rather than people that academics can look down upon. I think that's something that's really important because the work of academics is centered in community. I think it's really disruptive because it challenges these hierarchies and it challenges almost like what LeRoi said, leadership is a really strange concept within itself. It's a construct, right? I think that when we look at community centered leadership, one of the biggest things that people often don't talk about is that it's actually very much centered in disability justice, it's centered in challenging ableism because oftentimes, "leaders," they're seen as people who speak a certain way, look a certain way, move a certain way. These capitalistic ideals of like productivity and success and being productive, they kind of define what people see as leadership. I think in a lot of ways, it looks like challenging ableism and it looks at challenging these hierarchies. I think one of the great things is also that it looks like abolition to be honest. Community centered leadership should be hand in hand with abolition and I think that means abolishing the education system as it is not just reforming it. We're looking for something completely different because the system is rooted in anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-immigrant foundations and community leadership is disruptive because it introduces the idea of community centered learning and sees schools as kind of places of healing and of safety, rather than institutions or corporations that uphold structures of White supremacy and capitalism.

Ahona Mehdi ([01:02:56](#)):

I think these are some really beautiful things that come from community centered leadership. But again, it's like I said, with all of this work come challenges because youth especially, should not have to do the work. We do because it's right and it's because it's what our hearts tell us to do, but it's not something that we should have to do. Like I said before, there can be conflict, there can be children and mental

health crisis because this is not natural. It's not something that should happen. With that, I think there's also like a lot of insecurity that comes with that, a lot of hopelessness, a lot of feeling at fault, for when things don't go right or when things, when people are harmed because the system is kind of set up in a way that community feels like we are responsible for people. We feel like we failed people when it was actually the system that failed them, when it's actually the system that can't be there for them. It's hard when I feel like every system within these communities, every single system, every single institution, doesn't actually center community, the Education Act, Code of Conducts for trustees, they have no human rights or equity policies or foundations. There's absolutely nothing if you look in the Education Act about human rights violations and that kind of thing. Something that happened during my term as a student trustee is that a trustee said the N-word, a trustee referred to Palestinians as terrorists. Trustees repeatedly said things like, "All Lives Matter" and even then, when you refer to the Education Act, it's a barrier. You can't even remove these elected officials who are supposed to be actually representing Black students, representing these marginalized communities, even though they're directly inflicting harm and violence upon these communities and upon these students. I think that's one of the most difficult things because the lives of Black and racialized students are more important than giving these elected officials space to be educated because they can be educated at some point. I think that's important to acknowledge, but not at the cost or in situations where it's putting the students at risk. I think something that's really difficult with this is that a lot of the time when look at community centered leadership, people in education, academics, elected officials, executive seniors, they don't see community centered leadership as it actually is, and that's how students and community want it to be. A lot of the time they'll say the solution to everything is anti-racism anti-oppression training. That's not the solution to everything because even when it comes to, let's say police free schools. When we got the police terminated from Hamilton schools, yes, it was a huge win, but still to this day behind the scenes, we're doing work to make sure that the school board doesn't bring police back into schools and other ways that community doesn't realize. They're sneaky and they try to sneak them back in and they try to do things behind our backs because they think they can get away with it. I think that like it's difficult because people within these institutions create these kind of scapegoats so that they can get out of things. On the outside it looks like they're doing anti-racism work, they're doing anti-oppression work, but at the end of the day students are still being harmed, students are still being hurt. Community is still being hurt. Again, community centered leadership is very much about disrupting, it's very much about abolishing the education system as it is right now and imagining community centered learning and co-learning. But then again with that, the system is set up in a way where it feels like it's, un-doable a lot of the times because the system will say, what are the alternatives? I think the questions that we need to be asking rather than what are the alternatives is who cares about what the alternatives are, this isn't working for students right now, this isn't working for Black students, this isn't working for marginalized students and it's inflicting violence upon them so we have to find something else.

Vidya Shah ([01:07:09](#)):

Thank you, and snaps all around to that, that was so beautiful. Diana, did you want to jump in and share?

Diana Grimaldos ([01:07:16](#)):

Oh my God, Ahona, I think the future looks very bright with you in the leading. It gives me a lot of hope to hear our youth being able to be critical to a system that has inflicted so much power upon them. I absolutely agree with everything that you have say and as a parent, a lot of it resonated with me. Today we had our session with our cohort, it was our last session. We talk about community organizing, understanding power and public speaking. When we talk with communities, a lot about public speaking or these colonial idea of what public speaking is, it's always this idea of the speaker, the individual, the

person that makes money out of speaking at a public events. What's beautiful today is one mom actually shared and I wanted to share it because it was just so beautiful how she said it, "I never thought of public speaking as something that I will have to do with my kids." For me, for her to be able to say that out loud, she said, "My parents never let me talk back. My parents never let me have an opinion because they always say that the adults are talking and that was passed from generations of generations of colonialism. In school, we were told that you don't talk back to the adults, that you don't have ideas that as a kid, your ideas don't matter and the adults will set the stage." It seems ridiculous to me that in here, you have to call Ms. and Mrs. to your teacher. This idea of individuals that have the power, they hold the powers, they uphold the rules and they set up the rules. When you are able as a parent to establish, also these non-conforming ideas of what leadership can look like from the home, we're also disrupting how, and those are often invisibilized. We don't talk about them.

Diana Grimaldos ([01:09:22](#)):

Ahona, I can imagine your mom is a super leader because the way you speak, how you see the world, how you see the change, that is built upon upon your experiences, the experiences that you have with the leader at your house. I think that's one of the ways I see my daughter and my son. I hope they see that, I hope that they see the sacrifices that we make as an activist, as an advocate everyday, being here, not putting them to sleep because I'm speaking here. Those are the sacrifices that moms and parents and leaders face every day. All the burden that we have to face because the system is not working, it's not working. Now we learn that coming next school year online learning might be optional, that our public education is at risk to disappear because once you set up systems that before they were thinking about making mandatory, which was inaccessible. When we know that the education system is funded based on bodies in the physical school, what that looked like and what that means for us is that more schools will be closed. That worries me. When that announcement came, I was really scared and I will be really scared knowing that online learning will be an option, will be something that is on the menu, as an option, as an alternative moving forward. I'm very afraid that our public education system is deemed to disappear and that's what neoliberalism wants to do. Privatize our schools, privatize the ways in which learning can be better. Thinking about other ways of learning and how we can choose from the menu and find better options because you can afford it. What about those that can't afford those options? What about those that don't have the option, that don't have that privilege and that's what I'm worried about. For me, it's so important that families that don't usually have that voice. When I say parents, I refer to parents, caregivers and families, those that are caring for children that will be able to speak on their needs and will be able to seek, to realize what these options and what these alternatives are for families.

Vidya Shah ([01:11:48](#)):

Oh my goodness, what a rich conversation, what a rich conversation. I want to think about transitioning us as we bring the podcast to a close. To think about this idea of what we hope leaders, whatever that means, leadership, whatever that means, but what we hope for folks that identify as leaders in communities, in schools, in communities and schools, what we hope they might take away from this conversation. We have a couple of minutes here if folks wanted to jump in. Sylvia, can we start with you?

Sylvia Maracle ([01:12:30](#)):

We've a different notion of leaders, we refer often in where I come from in our language, as we call them title holders. They're not leaders, they're title holders, title holders do that. They hold for want of a better description in a basket, all of your social mores and your ethics and your history and your future and your teachings. It's their job to hold the mental, hold the model. We don't get to proclaim we're

leaders, people acknowledge you. The ceremony is called that you're being raised up, not above the people, just to be able to carry this. The view that I want to share maybe slightly different than what you're talking about. I think that if we're going to ultimately reconstruct a system, we have to break it down. In order to break it down all the institutions that have been talked about or alluded to during this, the police, justice, government, churches, banking, house services. They're all huge monoliths that are incredibly complicated and people don't seem to need help navigating them. What we're looking at doing is not recreating those structures, but creating in community, smaller structures. If your child doesn't have to go to a school where there's a thousand people, there's way less competition and way more ability to monitor what goes on and to make sure that their needs come first. We're looking at models that are doing that, we're looking at community health centers, instead of massive hospitals and COVID-19 should've taught us that. We even warehouse our old people in this culture and look what happened. For me, part of the issue of community being leaders, being responsible to your community is to bring the services back so that community schools are community schools, they're not massive high schools where you bus people from everywhere. We want our children to walk, so why aren't there schools every 10 blocks? If there are only 50 kids, what does it matter there's only 50 kids? 50 kids, you can give a lot more to as a community than you can to try to look at them again using the word, monolith, that we built. They're replicas of the past of institutions that hurt us. Why are we structuring our schools that way? Why don't we go to smaller, more intimate learning things where children themselves can be part of being the teacher, the instructor, the knowledge keeper who can carry their own bundles, whatever teachings you come from. And maybe, find their voices easier because they're not so small in the midst of all that. For me, community leadership is going to carry that basket and to strip back a lot of the institutions that we need and a lot of the crap we put in them.

Vidya Shah ([01:16:12](#)):

Thank you, Sylvia, thank you for that. LeRoi, your thoughts on this question, what do you hope leaders will take away?

LeRoi Newbold ([01:16:20](#)):

I hope that educational leaders within the system could take away this idea that the school board and the Ontario ministry cannot lead you. It can't lead you in teaching Black children, it isn't qualified. Your kids, their parents, they could lead you and be your boss. You work for them, to serve them. In terms of the curriculum, the first and most important thing to consider is the kids in front of you, not the Ontario curriculum, it's your kids, the talents and gifts that they have. They each have their individual purposes and everything else is an afterthought. If the system isn't designed to serve them, then the whole system has to come down in order to serve them. In the meantime, we have to look for and build and support as many alternatives as possible that there are based out in the community that are serving Black kids.

Vidya Shah ([01:17:25](#)):

Thank you so much, thank you for that. Ahona, thoughts on this question, what you'd like leaders to take away?

Ahona Mehdi ([01:17:31](#)):

When I look at leaders or so-called leaders, I'd want them to understand that leadership isn't really real, and that it's a construct. In that, what is real is community, what is real is love and what is real is the experiences of Black and Indigenous students and that needs to be what the priority is. I need leaders to know that they're not superior to the organizers on the ground, the students on the ground who have

saved the lives of community and who have saved the lives of children each and every day. This work isn't about people who label themselves as leaders, this work isn't about us as individuals. It's about each and every single one of us and it's about our safety. For example, like the media, when it came to me calling out the school board for all of the racism I had experienced and witnessed, they made my experience as something that was a one-off instance, but it isn't, and those with power need to understand that. If I left my organizing space, if I left Hamilton Students For Justice, if I left defund HPS, even though the media and members of the community may see me as a leader within my community, I would hope that I would have done enough that I would have mentored them enough and that I would have left enough of a foundation that even if I was there, people would know that the work does not begin with me and the work does not end with me. I think it's important for leaders to understand that onboarding and sharing space is the most important part of this work, the most important part of anti-racist and anti-oppressive work. The work is ongoing and that the work is collective and that we're equals, and no one is superior or inferior to one another. I really want leaders to know that we don't want to seat your table, we want to destroy your table. We want to create a home where everyone belongs, we're not asking for reform. We're asking for abolition and we're asking for a complete overhaul of the system as it is. I think leaders need to understand, like what LeRoi said, that they serve the community. You as leaders serve the community and the community does not owe you anything.

Vidya Shah ([01:19:40](#)):

Wow, thank you, thank you. Charline, thoughts on this, what you hope leaders will take away from this conversation.

Charline Grant ([01:19:47](#)):

I would say first and foremost, in the education system, there's nothing wrong with our children. There's something wrong with your system. Stop trying to fix our children, see them and teach them. That's what you're paid for, that's why you're there. The real leaders are the students because if there's no students you don't have that title as a teacher or director of education. We will empower the younger generation because what's a constant is that parents, community is not going anywhere, we're not going anywhere. We're empowering the younger ones, we're inspiring the younger generation. This work didn't start with me, I stand on shoulders, I stand on my ancestors, I stand on people before me who were doing this fight. At this point, if leaders don't recognize or realize that unless the system is destroyed and rebuilt, there is never going to be peace. There's no peace without justice. I liken it on to a stampede, the times that we're in right now. You could either be the one leading the stampede, running with the crowd or if you're going to be a bystander and stand by, who knows what might happen to you on the side. But, if you're standing still in the midst of it, we're going to trample you to get to where we're going. As far as the people, one of the campaigns Parents of Black Children is going to run during the election time is for communities to vote people and not party. It's local, elections is local. So you could ask them, show me what your anti-racism strategy looks like, show me in your policy, show me in your platform. If you can't, why am I voting for you? And if you do have it, if you get elected, I'm going to hold you to it. Oftentimes I know in my community, there's a lot of loyalty with the parties because they remember Trudeau. My grandmother would always say it wasn't for Trudeau come here, the younger Trudeau bringing in the Syrians, so we see that. But again, your local politicians, they don't see you, they don't show up for you and they don't champion you. We are not asking for anything extra, we're just asking what you give to other communities. I always liken it onto dating. Court me the way you court your other communities. I want you to take me on those dates. Court me, show me, show up at my door every day, do whatever you need to do. Tell me, show me what exactly what you're going to do. Take me out. What you are doing for us, what we're asking you to do is what you've done for others. One thing

that I saw last summer that really made a difference in how I work and operate is that it is going to be okay because there's so many Charline's that are coming out. The one thing I tell young people when I meet them, like the Ahona's of the world, I think about it. I'm like, yes, you could have guidance from us a little bit older, but don't change your style. I am adopting to your style. This unapologetic tongue that I have I didn't always have that. I say that to people, I didn't always have that. I get to tell folks every day when they have hurt me and harm my children and I mean, my children like children and that shouldn't be something that people shy away from. I see young people, I see my kids do it to me. That is exactly what is needed, that honesty, that transparency, you don't have to change that. The society's changing. These old heads who think it's going to be this way because it's always been done this way, what I'm seeing and if they haven't recognized it yet, then they're making the mistake. What is happening here and it's even this forum that I'm at and what I'm seeing is that it is not going away. I smile about COVID, I know COVID was horrible. Don't get me wrong, I'm not glorifying it. But what COVID has done, it has shown and given us another window. We are the people that have made mansion's out of pebbles. Now, we have this window of opportunity. We're never going to close it. That's what I want leaders to know. You're either gonna get on, get on the ship or jump ship. You're going to stay on the ship or you're going to jump over it. You make the decision because we're not going away. We want to destroy the system and rebuild it with us being there because nothing for us without us.

Vidya Shah ([01:24:47](#)):

Thank you, Charline, thank you. We are going to close this podcast with a final one sentence question for folks and that question is, in a sentence, how do you describe leading in and with community? Sylvia, we'll start with you.

Sylvia Maracle ([01:25:06](#)):

Powerful period.

Vidya Shah ([01:25:10](#)):

Thank you. And Diana.

Diana Grimaldos ([01:25:12](#)):

Relationship building at the center, the forgotten and/or willfully ignored voices.

Vidya Shah ([01:25:20](#)):

Thank you. LeRoi.

LeRoi Newbold ([01:25:24](#)):

Black children, Indigenous children, disabled children, transgender children are our bosses. We serve them. They lead us.

Vidya Shah ([01:25:33](#)):

Thank you. Charline.

Charline Grant ([01:25:37](#)):

How do I add to any of that? Wow. I say what LeRoi just said, I'm sorry. That's it.

Vidya Shah ([01:25:46](#)):

Love it. A big ditto. I love it. I love it. And Ahona.

Ahona Mehdi ([01:25:55](#)):

The work is the very thing that defines us as community organizers, but it's also the very thing that can break us. The only that can save us is knowing that we as a community keep each other safe.

Vidya Shah ([01:26:09](#)):

Oh my goodness. What a panel, what a panel, what a conversation. This has been tremendous learning and tremendous reflection for me. I really thank you all. I'd love to hear from Neethan. Any thoughts you have, Neethan, on sort of bringing us to a close this evening?

Neethan Shan ([01:26:29](#)):

It was such a rich conversation. White supremacy and racism are such adaptive animals in our society. One of my cautions to this discussion is that when we call something community centered leadership, we see it one way, but 10 years down the road, it's going to be whitewashed. It's going to be a term that's going to be used in funding proposals, just like multicultural and diversity and many of the things that have been co-opted into those academic circles and Eurocentric power making. It's important to ground all these conversations in reality. We talk about education system being racist. The system has people that are upholding that racist system and often educators are not held accountable. Those colour blind educators who don't see the historic disadvantage on Black, Indigenous and racialized children are actually those harmful "leaders." Those decision-makers that drag our communities through policies and procedures and use that as a tool to delay and delay and delay and burnout our activists as a form of these policies were created to serve them. We saw that with the Hodan Nalayeh Secondary School renaming process. These are all educators who are in leadership positions, but these are harmful leaders. I'm trying to contrast what the other side is. People of colour who often put their own communities down to feel like they're closer to White privilege. Those are harmful leaders. Non-Black, non-Indigenous folks who fall into that trap of model minority, trying to please the colonizers and their power brokering are harmful leaders. We have so many of them in our system, the ones that control the resources, the ones that give out this \$5,000, \$2000, \$3000 for a performance, as if that is their form of equity and try to diminish the magnitude of the problem. And the ones that don't see racism as an advantage. Racism, they often want to talk it as a disadvantage because they want to focus on who's been impacted without taking responsibility that they are benefiting and the system of advantage. Often, there's no acknowledgement of that. All of these things are the problem side of the leadership that we see in the education system. I'm saying this because most of the podcast listeners might be from those circles where they would see these people reflected in. The other piece is that very beautiful community led, community center leadership that is grounded, that we talked about here. The people that have collective accountability, the people who are here will not be able to break away from their principle because they have this strong sense of collective responsibility and credibility within them, that's part of them who they are. They're not doing this for a job. They're not doing it for loyalty to a system. They're doing it for the purpose of grounded in people. I think that support network, that trust, the collective healing, collective support is the beautiful part of this community centered leadership. There's a cost as Ahona mentioned many times, the burnout, the health impact, the lack of ability to take care of ourselves and so on in all of these spaces because we are fighting a system that is very detrimental to us. We cannot just celebrate community centered leadership without health. I'll just finish

off with one thing though is that, the work that we need to do in the community will continue. There's always people, like I always say, to racialized folks who are non-Black, non-Indigenous, don't take what you have today for granted. That came because of hard work of the Indigenous activists and Black activists for centuries. We are able to benefit from it, do not take it for granted. Do your share to make sure you're strongly in position to support the collective struggle together. I think we have a lot of positive things that are coming out of this. I love the fact that we are exploring a new form of talking about leadership through this exercise. Thank you.

Vidya Shah ([01:30:27](#)):

Thank you, Neethan, for all of your thoughts in the beginning, and for bringing us to a close here today. To all, sharing so many important points, this idea that you shared that Whiteness and White supremacy will take this and co-op this term and turn it into something else for the benefit of White power. I think that's something that we need to watch for, and that we need to push back against and that we need to keep fighting against. I very much appreciate your thoughts today. I very much appreciate the panel's thoughts today. What energy and what power in today's conversation. This has been truly a wonderful learning experience for me, so thank you to all of you for sharing and for showing up. The synergy and how people shared and what people shared was just amazing. I also want to say to our listeners, thank you for being on this journey with us. Whether you are listening to this podcast now or in a couple of years or several years to heed the caution that we are continuously grappling with what it means to be a leader, with what leadership means. If you have settled in what that term is, then there's something perhaps that needs to be rethought and reconstructed in your mind. With tremendous respect for generations of communities that have been fighting this battle, for the differences in the ways that communities have been fighting this battle and for generations to come that will continue to fight this battle, I wish us all tremendous love and humanity in this journey. I think that's what it's bringing us back to. No leadership without community. Love that. Thank you all, thank you all for being part of this and thank you to the listeners.