

Peter DeWitt: I never considered myself a role model, but then I found that there were people that said I was a role model because they got to know me first and then they found out I was gay. And it changed their perception of what gay men looked like.

Mindi Wiseman: Hello, and welcome back to Working Well, a podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country discussing how to support the well-being of the workforce. I'm Mindi Wiseman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE. In this conversation, NCSSE training specialist Melanie Goodman speaks with Peter DeWitt, an elementary school teacher and principal for almost 20 years, who now runs workshops, coaches school leaders, and provides keynotes focusing on collaborative leadership, fostering inclusive school climates, and connected learning. He is also the author of several books and writes the Finding Common Ground Blog, published by Education Week. Peter shares how he inadvertently became a role model for other LGBTQI+ educators and how he evolved in his desire to keep his personal identity separate from his professional identity. But he begins by talking about how his own academic struggles inspired him to help others through teaching.

Peter DeWitt: I actually graduated fourth from last in my class from high school. I struggled academically my whole career. I had failed out of a couple of community colleges. I was a long-distance runner back then, and I mostly went for running, which is not a good plan. And then on my third attempt, my sister Trish had actually said, "I just want you to get a two-year degree." I did. I went to Hudson Valley Community College. They had a cross-country team, but my coach said, "DeWitt, you're not going to be a professional runner. You need to go into the Learning Assistance Center if you want to run with us." And I did. I walked in with a 1.7 GPA, and that semester I walked out with a 3.86. And I ended up getting recruited, interestingly enough for cross-country and track. But it was also because of my grades.

I entered into the elementary ed program at a local college here in Albany, New York. I had a professor who I loved. He has passed on. He wanted me to do one hour of observation per week in a classroom, and he put me in this classroom with this guy Dave Kazanczak. And Dave was just the coolest, best teacher I'd ever seen in my life.

Melanie Goodman: And what grade was this? This was also elementary.

Peter DeWitt: He was teaching fourth grade. And he asked me, he said, "Do you have observation work to do?" And I said, "I do." And I'm not kidding you. I had to do 30 hours and I did over 600 because I tracked it, and then I became Dave's first student teacher as well. And Dave kind of single-handedly just showed me that I could be the teacher I wanted to be. Ended up working at a private school for boys for a year and a half because it was hard to find a job back then. And then I ended up getting a job in Poughkeepsie, New York. So about an hour, hour and a half outside of New York City, teaching first grade in a public school. And I

taught for 11 years. It's funny, with social media, you didn't know back then, we didn't have social media, but I'm on Facebook with a bunch of kids that had me as a teacher, and I've actually officiated the wedding of three of my former first graders

Melanie Goodman: Oh, that's so sweet.

Peter DeWitt: So yeah, so that's how my trajectory into education. It's funny to be successful in the thing that you weren't successful in for so long.

Melanie Goodman: You were really lucky to have incredible mentors. Both your sister, it sounds like, but also just one right after another just saw something in you and they guided you along the way.

Peter DeWitt: Yes, I was very fortunate. And I still talk to my coach from Hudson Valley as well. Yeah, I still talk to him as well. They were great. And Dave, I still talk to. Actually, he's retired, but I work in his district from time to time. So it's funny how things come full circle.

Melanie Goodman: So I know you also said somewhere that I read, you were cautious when you were in the school, teaching in the school about who you were as a gay man, and you had varied experiences. Can you speak just a little bit more about that? I know you said initially you came in thinking keep the personal, personal. That kind of conflict created issues for you and hoped you could maybe share that a little bit about that.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah. I came out when I was 26. It was actually, once again, my sister Trish came in. I was going through some pretty bad experiences and she could tell something was up. And I really wasn't entirely sure I was gay. I know that sounds crazy, but I didn't have any role models or something like that. That's just not how I identified. And I was 26 and she and I talked on the phone and she said, "Something's going on with you and we need to talk about it." And I said, "I can't." And she said, "I know you're gay." And I said, "I am. Don't tell Mom." Not that my mom was going to be terrible, but just the fear you feel when you are closeted and then all of a sudden somebody knows, you just panic. I mean, I do. I remember just the panic of my life is going to change. I don't want my life to change. People are going to look at me differently. What if I lose my job? Because that was seriously a fear.

Kind of going through the next few years as a teacher, yeah, you're always really cautious, especially when you're a guy in an elementary school. You're always trying to be very cautious. But I worked for some principals that it was definitely not okay to be out. And, quite honestly, I was just having this conversation with friends at Friendsgiving a couple of weeks ago. We were talking about our coming out experience because I was actually talking about the fact that I was going to do this interview. An element of that is not just the people, like I'm not into blaming, "They were terrible and that's why I couldn't be who I was." It was

also me. I didn't feel comfortable. I did not have any really positive role models who were gay role models. And the people that I did see who were gay were people that I didn't necessarily, I didn't identify with, I'm just going to be honest with you. I tend to be pretty shy and to myself.

And it was so it was also navigating that space was not just because of the people around me, it was because I wasn't comfortable with it. And it took me a few years to actually feel comfortable with who I am just in general. And I think there's also the element that I was worried about being pigeonholed as the gay teacher or the gay principal or the gay author or the gay facilitator. There was a lot of that because it's not that I'm ashamed because I'm certainly not. I'm very comfortable in my own skin. But also I don't really like to be labeled.

And then I met my partner, Doug in 2001, and I was teaching down there and he came to visit. And my new principal, I just remember he was not at all comfortable with any of it. Honestly, you have to think about the nuances of what I was dealing with back then too, because-

Melanie Goodman: Because we're talking what year?

Peter DeWitt: We're talking between 1997 and-

Melanie Goodman: '97, okay.

Peter DeWitt: And 2000. I was very insanely proud to be a teacher. I had an excellent relationship with my students. I really did. I have 30 first graders. They were the greatest. I mean, it was a highly diverse school. We had kids that came from low-income housing. We had Vassar College across the street. We had Vassar professors for some of the parents. And we created a really amazing community in the classroom. And to be honest with you, that was my saving grace for a few years because my personal life was just not in a great space. It was just very awkward. And I didn't know where I fit in and who's going to be my friend. And because back then it was a huge deal. Melissa Etheridge came out, Ellen DeGeneres came out, and I thought, "Oh, it's going to be one happy thing." And it just wasn't that case.

And so honestly, my professional life back then was my saving grace. And I just really enjoyed teaching first grade. So I almost didn't just want to have the personal life kind of intersect with my professional life. And for me, I wanted to compartmentalize. It was just easier. And it's not that I need people to know this about me in general. I mean, quite honestly, even talking about it right now feels uncomfortable. I keep my personal life to myself. But with the parents and stuff, it was a really amazing situation back then. And I found that people loved me for me, not anything else that they may or may not have known about me.

And then I met my partner, Doug, and that changed a lot of that because we always joke that he and his friends would talk about all the subjects that I would

not talk about it at an elementary school. So it was just this very opposite, and I felt really uncomfortable. I knew, we would have conversations out in the open now when we're eating dinner, and it just was not comfortable for me because I was so used to just being this kind of compartmentalized school teacher.

Melanie Goodman: So that changed. That ultimately changed.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah.

Melanie Goodman: And I guess I'm wondering, because I'm thinking of people who will be listening to this who are in similar and what they're hearing and what you say and your journey to where you were affirmed and then where you were challenged and how you came through it a little bit to where you saw the need, not just for you, but others like you.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah, I think, like I got comfortable with myself, and then people around me got comfortable. My mom, my family members, my sister. And then because of Doug, we had a group of friends who straight, gay, didn't really matter all the way around. So you're surrounded by that. So the experiences you have are different. And it was kind of like this opening where I just became much more comfortable in my own skin, but also because of the people that I've surrounded myself with. When I got hired to be a principal, you kind of go back to, honestly, I went back to the fear. Even though I got hired in 2006, it was 10 years after I came out, I was still nervous about what do they know? Is this going to be a big deal? And the superintendent happened to be gay. When I got hired, she said, "So you're gay." And I'm like, "I am." And she had friends that knew my partner and stuff. And and it was in a rural area outside of Albany, New York, but it was a very inclusive community. And I found that, honestly, I had fantastic parents and kids in that elementary school and I was there for eight years.

I think that there are a few things to keep in mind. Number one, I became more comfortable in myself and then surrounded myself with good people. And you learn who your friends are at that time. And then instead of shutting down and retracting and say, "I can't do this," I kept moving forward because I got to the point where I thought, "I deserve to be an equal just like everybody else does." And then it became more of a case of, "I actually need people to know I'm out because perhaps I'm a role model." I never considered myself a role model. But then I found that there were people that said I was a role model because they got to know me first and then they found out I was gay. And it changed their perception of what gay men look like.

When those things start to happen, you just start thinking, "Okay." And then even when I did my doctoral work, my doctoral chair, Jim Butterworth, he said, "I know you want to do something in social justice when you're doing your dissertation. Have you thought about doing something around safeguarding LGBT students?" Because back then it was LGBT. And I said, "Really? Is that a thing? I don't think that's really a big deal, is it?" And it was. It was actually hugely big deal. I was the first person, at the small college where I was doing my

doctoral work, I was the first person to ever be called in front of the IRB, the Institutional Review Board, because the chairperson was uncomfortable with the fact that I was focusing on gay students and safeguarding gay students. And I started to get pushback.

And I remember distinctly at that time not feeling inspired to write the lit review and all this stuff. And I was really having some trouble with the writing part because I was thinking, "I don't know if this is going to be a big deal. I'm not seeing the inspiration here. I think people are going to look at this and say, 'Who cares?'" And then when I started to get the pushback from the IRB and a parent at that school actually started a hate blog, and then she started targeting us for being gay. And that's when I saw it. That's when all of those things were happening at the same time. And I was like, "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no." And that's what inspired me to move forward and be more outspoken in what I hope to be an eloquent way.

Melanie Goodman: So at that juncture, you were focused on students, like LGBT students, and their experience and what they need. I assume you kind of morphed into considering what the experience is for practitioners and teachers and principals or whatever who are either gay themselves or in this environment where they have staff who are and have to figure out how to navigate that.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah, it's not easy for people. And after the dissertation, the dissertation got published and I graduated and all that stuff. And I started writing for Education Week in 2011. So I would write around about LGBT issues and I would get some major pushback. But interestingly enough, I would get pushback on both sides, if you can call it sides. So let's just say conservative on one side. I would get pushback from people saying, "You need to keep your mouth shut." And they would send me pretty nasty comments. But honestly, on the liberal left side, I would get people who would say things like, "You're not pushing hard enough." And I remember just thinking, "Wow, that's interesting. I'm not making anybody happy." But I also knew that what I was thinking about was how hard can you push in a school?

Because what we know is that self-efficacy is a confidence we have in our own actions. And if we don't feel confident, we're going to slacken our efforts. And if we do feel confident, we're going to double our efforts. And one of the reasons why I looked at safeguarding LGBT students back then is because we, in New York State, we are going to have the Dignity For All Students Act and LGBT students were part of the population we had to look at safeguarding. And I knew that there's the Goldilocks principle. If you push too hard, people are not going to hear you. They're not going to listen. If you're too soft, you're not really doing enough. So finding that happy medium is really important. Teachers, principals, superintendents, they are not going to support anybody under the equity inclusion umbrella, if there is such a thing, are not going to support that work if they feel like you're pushing so hard.

And that's not to say we don't need people who push hard. We definitely do. It's just that that's not the particular route that I was going to take. And I just know in my particular case, it has helped. It has been beneficial because I've had people say that I changed their mindset or they never thought about things through that perspective or those kind of comments come along. And then now I've got students who have reached out to say, "You're a role model for me and you didn't know you were." Or I'll hear from teachers and assistant principals and principals. I've had people reach out to me who have seen me at workshops, and they've sent me private messages to say things like, "It's nice to see a gay man at your level in the world of education." So it's been an area of growth where when I get pushback, I'm looking, saying, "I'm not so sure I'm comfortable with you pushing back and telling me that I can't speak." And that's where I start moving forward.

Melanie Goodman: Yeah, I think there's an assumption that somehow people in positions of power, call it principals, superintendents, can just make things happen.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah. Not at all.

Melanie Goodman: And going back to what you were saying about self-efficacy, they have the same challenge everybody else does to get on board with what needs to happen.

Peter DeWitt: And that's the image you represent. I had a couple of guys a long time ago, because I had been asked to go get my degree in school administration. I said, "No way. I'm never going to be a school principal." And I had a couple of guys say, "What if you could be the principal you want to be, not the one you think you have to be?" And that was very freeing. So there's that image you represent too. And the image that I saw of myself was very different than the principals I had when I was growing up, or even the principals of places where I student taught. And then even teaching the principals were not, I didn't identify in the same way that they did. So you're just going through all of that kind of stuff too.

Melanie Goodman: So you sound hopeful.

Peter DeWitt: Oh, always, always.

Melanie Goodman: Always hopeful.

Peter DeWitt: Always hopeful. No, seriously, I am. One of my biggest areas of growth over the years has been to not always try to control everything but control my reaction to what happens. And that's the meditation side of it coming in.

Melanie Goodman: Sure, yeah.

Peter DeWitt: I've been practicing meditation for about seven years, and I am always hopeful. I truly believe that. And I need that to be a part of what I speak about because people see me as, I've written eight or nine books and I'm doctor so-and-so

when I speak and all that stuff, I always tell them about my growing up experience and barely graduating from school because I want them to see their students differently, especially in a day and age of accountability. And I'm always hopeful about the conversations I have. I mean, I call my blog Finding Common Ground for a reason. I have conservative, and I don't even know where I fall sometimes, but within my own family. And I'll have people say things like, "I stopped talking to them because," and I can't do that. I lost my sister and mom four months apart. We have to figure this out. I think I go to inspiration when reading books. I pick books that are going to help me be hopeful. I like being hopeful.

Melanie Goodman: Yeah, that's good. That's important, right?

Peter DeWitt: Yeah.

Melanie Goodman: That's a good message. So what would you say is maybe the one or two biggest barriers that we have to overcome today?

Peter DeWitt: Yeah, one for sure is that we don't hear each other. So, listen, my barrier is also a strength, because the barrier is that I understand that there are going to be people that I meet that don't agree with me and I don't need them to. I don't like the word tolerate either. Like tolerance is that word that comes up a lot. I don't want to be tolerated. I don't want to tolerate other people. What I need to find is the common ground. So that barrier is how do I really hear what somebody's saying?

I was in Monterey, California for coaching work, and I was sitting at the bar having dinner, and a woman was sitting next to me and she started asking questions. And she was certainly somebody who would be seen as the opposite end of the spectrum of where I am. And we talked. I really wanted to hear what she was saying because she talked about social-emotional learning. And I just asked, "Can you tell me what you know about social-emotional learning?" And she had to explain it. And I said, "In schools, we have a common language, but we don't have a common understanding."

Melanie Goodman: Yeah, I read that. I read that you said that somewhere, maybe you wrote about this in your blog. I thought, "Oh, that's dead on. That's exactly what's going on."

Peter DeWitt: Yeah, we do in a lot of things. And it's not just-

Melanie Goodman: Not just that.

Peter DeWitt: It's not just that. It's everything from saying differentiated instructions, science of reading, whatever it is. We have these words that we use all the time, but we don't have a common understanding. So I wanted to develop a common understanding with her. I really wanted to hear her. I didn't need to sway her. We were going to go our separate ways. But she had a daughter who was 10

years old and she was asking questions. And I said, "Here's what I know about social-emotional learning. This is what I have written about where social-emotional learning is concerned. Is that your experience?" And she said, "That's not what I hear. This is what I see." So sometimes schools don't do themselves any favors either because they don't clearly articulate what it is.

Melanie Goodman: We kind of assume there are two sides, the people that support it and the people that don't. Whereas as you were just indicating, even within the system, the educators, they don't have a common understanding of what they think it is, what they're doing. So it's challenging.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah., if you're not communicating, if you can't articulate it, you can't communicate it. We're always going to have phrases in education. Every industry does. We're always going to have acronyms. But we lose people when we use the words and we don't explain what they mean or at least our understanding of what they mean. And maybe because I'm a leadership coach or I moderate Show For Ed Week and stuff, I am deeply interested in asking questions.

Melanie Goodman: Right.

Peter DeWitt: I really want-

Melanie Goodman: And then you're a communicator.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah. I want to ask questions. I want to get their understanding of where they are, see where it kind of jives with mine. But it's also the idea that when I don't understand something, because things come up all the time, acronyms alone in education, we can talk in full sentences without using real words.

Melanie Goodman: It's shocking.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah., and I will have to ask-

Melanie Goodman: It is shocking.

Peter DeWitt: I will ask, like, "I heard you just say this. Could you tell me what it is?" I have no fear asking you for clarification on something that I don't know. We need to be able to do that more. So that's one barrier. And I think it's a really big barrier.

I think the other barrier right now, and this is probably one that's going to sting, is that we have multiple generations within the same school, especially if you're counting kids. But if you're thinking about teachers alone, you're crossing, people have talked about five generations that are there. And there are times that the language around, specifically when we're talking about LGBTQ students, there's a lot of intersectionality. There's a lot of this with acronyms and words that I think there are other people that just don't understand it and

they don't feel comfortable asking questions. And I once had a business director during a workshop come up to me during the break, and she looked at me and said, "I think sometimes schools are too inclusive."

And I said, "Wow, I haven't heard that before."

Melanie Goodman: That's a new one.

Peter DeWitt: "Can you talk a little bit about that?" And she said, "No, I just think we do. People are working too hard to make all kids feel comfortable. And I think kids, you know what? They're just going to have to live with it." And I was like, "Well, that's certainly one stance." But what I was really hearing her, because I feel like when people say something, is that really what they mean or are those just words and you have to ask questions to get to the deeper level of what they mean? When she said that about we're too inclusive, I said, "What I'm hearing you say is that the acronyms seem like sometimes they're too much." And she said, "Yeah, I just don't understand it. And why do we always have to identify as this, this, this, and this?" And I said, "Sometimes people need to identify because they don't feel like they have an identity and this is the connection they're going to make."

So one of the barriers that I also see is that in that need to identify, sometimes that pushes other people away because it's a lot for them to take in.

Melanie Goodman: Right, and you had said, it's kind of related to this generational thing.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Melanie Goodman: It's far into their experience, just really far into what they experienced as students or in their profession or in their families, it's like too much. It's more than they can-

Peter DeWitt: Yeah. "This is not what I experienced when I was a kid. And why do kids have to, kids are spoiled these days." So I see the barrier sometimes too, as that. And it's the same thing with hearing people, so it's the same spectrum, but it's just, I think sometimes the acronyms and the words also push people away.

Melanie Goodman: They don't help build bridges. They're intimidating.

Peter DeWitt: They are.

Melanie Goodman: Because it's clinical sounding, right?

Peter DeWitt: Yes.

Melanie Goodman: And it sounds like, "Oh, I must be stupid not to know what that actually means." And all that. So that leads me to thinking about how you might just make a

recommendation to your fellow colleagues out there, your fellow educators, about how do you keep people in the work, motivated and inspired to keep doing what they're doing, especially if they are some kind a unique or special group, and they're somewhat isolated because of that experience in their school or wherever in their community.

Peter DeWitt:

I think there are a few things. I have a colleague who has become a really good friend. His name is Mike Nelson. And we had just written a book together that'll come out next year. And he talks a lot about human interconnectedness. And he's an incredibly positive guy, much more positive than I am. What he has taught me, because he often will have a different perspective, he's a retired superintendent and he works for a state organization, but he's a thought partner for me. Number one is surround yourself with people who are going to inspire you. He inspires me from a professional level. He'll send me an email and say, "Have you ever thought about?" Or we'll talk and say, "Have you ever thought about?" Finding people who are going to be like that, who are going to inspire you. That's one of the things.

The other thing for me is go into things as a learner. I have often said that leaders will go into a meeting with one idea and want to walk out with the same one, but that's not leadership. Leadership is when you walk into a meeting with one idea and walk out with a better one.

Melanie Goodman:

Right.

Peter DeWitt:

So I go into every situation I'm in as a learner. I go into my coaching sessions as a learner. I've learned a great deal from the people that I coach because they're in situations that I've never had that context. I go into workshops or keynotes. I co-construct success criteria with the audience, no matter if it's one person or over a thousand people. I'm going in as a learner. What can I learn in this situation? It's not me coming in to deliver and just say, "This is what I think." It's about me or us having people who can come to us to say, "This is what we think we're hearing." And the more you can do that both in a work or personal experience, the better off you're going to be.

I don't expect everybody to love the fact that I'm gay. And Lord knows I've heard comments about it over the years. And I'm not always going to love people for maybe their views, but I do want to see each other as more human. And all of these things that I'm talking about, I think are just ways for us to see each other as more human. It's just amazing to hear people talk about others who don't agree with them. They vilify. And I can't do that. And I'm not saying that everybody needs to be Pollyanna. That's not what I'm looking for, because there are certain views that do deserve to be vilified. But I think in the natural progression of how we interact with each other in education and how we talk to each other and the people I surround myself with, I want to get to know them. I don't want to vilify them for not having the same perspective that I do. So I hope that doesn't sound too corny, but those are-

Melanie Goodman: No, it's not at all. So that I would imagine is a feature, or a characteristic, this notion of being a learner, you would especially like to see in school leaders, right?

Peter DeWitt: Yes.

Melanie Goodman: In principals and superintendents that kind of come at that position from that kind of servant leadership kind of attitude of really-

Peter DeWitt: Yes. That's perfect. I think leaders think they have to know everything.

Melanie Goodman: Yeah.

Peter DeWitt: They feel this pressure. And my job is to get them to understand that it doesn't always have to be your way. And that you can go in as a learner, because when we stop going into situations as a learners, why are we here?

Melanie Goodman: Especially ironic in the education field.

Peter DeWitt: Yeah. And I do, there's so many things that, so many different places that I work, and they're very diverse. I mean, I work around the world, but even within just the United States, I work on the big island of Hawaii where they have 100% poverty. And to hear about how kids have to get to school every day. Or I work in California in a city that has some of the highest gang populations per capita than any other city in California. Or even when I'm in Arkansas. I'm working with people that not only are they teaching and leading every day, but they also, they have full bus runs because they don't have bus drivers, so they're driving a bus with 60 kids in the morning, teaching, and then driving the kids back home at night.

And it's like, there's so many things that you can learn. And there's a high school that I'm working with in Arkansas too, that is for people who dropped out of high school so they're 19 to 72 years old, and they will get a high school diploma, not a GED. And I visited the school because I'm just really inspired by the work they do and interested. If you're not open to learning, you're missing out on a lot of really fantastic opportunities.

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