

Democracy's College

Episode 25: Race, Decolonizing, Practices, and Community Engaged Education

Dr. Heather Fox Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at ocrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher talks with Dr. David Stovall, professor of African-American Studies and Education Policy Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, about the influence of race and urban education, community development, and housing.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Here with me today for Democracy's College podcast is Dr. David Stovall, who studies the influence of race and urban education, community development, and housing. His work investigates the significance of race and the quality of schools located in communities that are changing both racially and economically. From a practical and theoretical perspective, his research draws from critical race theory, educational policy analysis, sociology, urban planning, political science, community organizing, and youth culture. Dr. Stovall is a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Thanks for being with us this afternoon.

Dr. Stovall: No problem. Thanks so much for having me.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Wanted to talk with you about the most recent lecture that you gave. You gave a really wonderful keynote today at the Black and Latino Male Summit, and you talked about decolonizing practices, and I'm wondering, for our listeners, I think you really frame the interesting dialogue, if you will, in terms of what decolonization says and then what's in contrast to that in terms of us walking the walk of our talk.

Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Dr. Stovall: Yeah, so I mean it's always an interesting thing to think about decolonization because indigenous scholars and indigenous people have always talked about decolonization is actually connected to land. So when we think about, but land is also knowledge. So if we are decolonizing knowledge, where does that start? If we think about how we have actually been taught. What we've learned based on that kind of schooling versus an education. If we think about school and education as being two different things, school being the place where we're rewarded essentially for ordering compliance, education being this place where we're champion for asking questions of these conditions that we're faced with and work with others to change them. Now decolonization becomes this practice of saying, what are we willing to do to change the condition? Right? As

knowledge, so what are we willing to build out, which is our knowledge to change our conditioning.

Thinking about that because these ... and going from that indigenous practice of thinking about when we talk about decolonization is really our responsibility to land, but this land that we exist on being stolen land and now where does that rest in our own understanding of African descended people, who have been brought here to performance this particular labor. So now what is the responsibility to the folks who have had their land stolen? Right? So really thinking about decolonizing practices, saying what has been stolen from us and now what are we willing to do to get it back? Right? And in that starting with us in terms of a decolonizing practice starts with how we think about our work and who we do work with.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: The work that you do with the collective of college professors in California and Arizona, New York. You all teach high school courses in addition to your duties and responsibilities as university faculty. You provide coursework to historically underserved schools so that you're opening up and riding and participation in college access for students to get early college credit, and that's incredible because often there are not many on-ramps, particularly accelerated post-secondary pathways for underserved students and namely youth of color. And so, can you share more in terms of what can be done to do more of this type of work for underserved youths so that we can move from just access to getting them to completion, because I think that really also speaks to what you are doing in terms of walking your talk relative to decolonizing practices and paying it forward.

Dr. Stovall: So I think one of the things, and this is always a thing at four-year institutions; all these four-year institutions had this kind of college bridge thing. It's some places it's robust; other places, kind of dormant. And what it was *really* set up to do was to have these kind of high-achieving students be able to take classes at the college level and get early-interest credit for it. So we just thought about an inversion of that, and I think to your question around thinking about that broadly or deeply is you can get university professors, especially if we think about these kind of large land-grant institutions, you can get a professor to actually have this class, meaning for with any department head or forward-thinking dean, could say, "All right, we can have a faculty member. We'll make this course that they teach with the high school students part of their course load." Right?

And then that's another way to kind of think about. So if it's part of their course load, then they're already equipping those young folks to do a couple of things. They're pairing them, letting them see college up front in terms of what college space is and what the requirements or what the ask is early on. And then they also are establishing a community connection. Another thing that folks could do in terms of ... and I think about it as the second way you can teach that college, and this is what a couple of my colleagues did a couple of years ago, you could teach that college course on the high school's campus.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So this is a form of dual enrollment, dual credit, concurrent enrollment?

Dr. Stovall: So dual credit, dual enrollment. You're just teaching it in a different space. The third piece is that you could have an existing class and bring and incorporate those students. So now you just make the numbers in that class higher and departments like this because they still get the FTEs on it, right? So you make that number larger. Those high schoolers come to that class with those undergrads, or what have you, and now you have this larger space where the old model was just ... it would be like two or three students kind of embedded in the class and nobody would know who they were. Everybody would think that they wanted to graduate or what have you. Where this model would say, "Okay, you really want folks to see what college is? Let's put them in a—

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So who bears the cost of the students coming to you and being in that course?

Dr. Stovall: So actually when you think about it in this way, this is a recruitment model for universities. So the universities would bear that cost, but if you think about it in a particular way, you cut it down because it will be a part-time enrollment. You would have a process where they would get, because it's just one course, you could parcel that out in terms of whatever the charge is per credit hour, and then now you can think about for people wanting to do it long term, you can either secure external dollars to make that happen or if you have, and I'm just thinking about it, for example the College of Education, that cost is easily absorbed because it's only one course. And as you think about that, if you wanted to do it in numerous courses, it would be a great expenditure, definitely, but for that one course, if it was one course, that expenditure would be minimal.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So when you and your colleagues go into the high schools and you're teaching the content that you would normally teach on campus, but for the students at their own sites, what have you seen in terms of how they're thinking about college, their efficacy, and how many of them actually do circle back and apply and end up attending your institutions?

Dr. Stovall: So I think this thing around fielding their opinions or feelings about college, at first, there's kind of a mixed group. It's kind of a mixed set of opinions. Like some folks are ready to go. They feel like they are prepared; they're up for the challenge. Other folks are hesitant and saying, "Okay, I like what we're doing here, but I don't know if I'm necessarily ready for college because of the pace, the financial burden, or what have you." So those are real things that we have to take into account. So our first year we got a good grouping of people who actually came to UIC. But our real intention was if folks came to UIC, all to the good. If they didn't, all to the good. The main thing was to get them in a four-year pathway, right, to degree attainment.

That's our thinking around it. Now of course universities like it if they enroll and they will give you credit for it if you enroll in those spaces. But our thing was really around just getting folks into four-year schools. But there is some cache, I

do believe, if young folks are able to take those classes, potentially on the college campus, because now they kind of see the function of the place and are able to figure out if they could actually engage in that type of rhythm. So there's a number of ways to do it. But we saw a good we actually saw that first group, that 2009 group, we saw a good grouping of them actually going to UIC. So we had three classes going, we shared a lot of students, so altogether it was maybe about 50 students who were between those three classes, and we got probably, let's see, ten folks between the Urbana and Chicago campus. So a pretty good grouping of folks.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: And then the remaining students, did you all follow them to see if they did get on a four-year pathway?

Dr. Stovall: So the vast majority, up around 80 percent, got into a four-year pathway. Actually, some of those folks are now current classroom teachers. So it worked itself out in a particular way. And actually, one of the students who was in that grouping of classes, he's now an Upward Bound counselor at Roosevelt.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Very nice. Let's talk about your book *Born Out of Struggle*, critical race theory, school creation, and the politics of interruption. The book details ways in which community members, organizers, activists, and scholars are working through and across differences of history and age, race, gender, you name it. And it conceptualizes as well as talks about how it was actualized to have this Social Justice High School, right? Greater Lawndale High School for Social Justice. As we talk about how to have our work be engaged and understanding that part of that engagement means difficult dialogues. Part of that work in terms of it really showing up in action does require interruption. How do you navigate and situate merging social justice, the imperative that you have in your scholarship in a meaningful, authentic way? Because it proves challenging for some folks to show up in that and the fullness of themselves that way beyond the pages of what they're conceptualizing, right?

Dr. Stovall: Yeah.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Theorizing about and actually walking it out. So what advice would you give to those folks that want to center social justice activism and their scholarly work?

Dr. Stovall: Yeah, I would say that what a group of organizers out in California told me awhile back, they said, "You have to trust your struggle." And what they mean by that is you have to trust your ability to articulate your process and your humility in engaging this process. Because really the larger project of doing something like a book like *Born Out of Struggle* is to really interrupt. To provide an example of an interruption to the colonial project of traditional research, right? So to really say, okay, research and especially with communities of color and isolated, marginalized situations has always been done on people. Right? So now what does it actually mean to engage in a collaborative effort and to document that collaborative effort. Right? To say the colonial project of traditional educational research has rarely been about improving the condition,

right? It's only been about improving a condition that's based on this white recipe, Western European descended norm, right?

So now, for folks who are trying to do that work, trusting your struggle means that, yes, you are interrupting the narrative, the traditional narrative of research. Now, if you have made the intentional decision to interrupt that narrative, now you have to articulate what that interruption is, right? So actually, when I was a student here, we read this book by this guy named Andrew Gitlin called *Power and Method*. And it was an edited volume; Gitlin put it together. And it was all these people who were talking about the traditional route of research doesn't necessarily lean towards a justice condition, right? And the justice condition ... if the justice condition is determined by the people who have experienced the injustice, it's going to look completely different. Right?

So Linda Tuhiwai Smith talks about this decolonizing research, Lee Patel talks about this and her decolonizing of educational research. So this thing around really asking these questions that are allowing us to engage that justice position, so that justice condition. So people who are thinking about doing this work, I think it's important to understand that it's a very *different* type of work. It is a more longitudinal work, and it is a type of work that will call yourself into question, right? The role you occupy as a researcher, how you appear in these spaces in relationship to gender, how you appear in spaces in relationship to race. So all of these now are on the table. And now when you put that in conversation with this interruption, then you trust that your articulation will be right and exact with what you've sent out to do. Right?

And that's, you know, we always talk about in qualitative research, it being messy, right? This is the *messiest*, right, if we've got to kind of put it in context. This thing around really being clear about that because it's not that traditional research is not useful. But we also have to say to what extent is that relevant and useful to these particular struggles? Right? So when you're working with folks, those traditional conventions of research may not be of use. But this other thing around what are we? And it's really, when you're doing this work on the ground, it's always about what is it connected to why and for what? And I think those for folks who are thinking about doing work in this way, the why and for what questions, have to be on the front end as opposed to the back end.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Speaking of the why and the what and thinking about your own activism and scholarship because with you it's seamless, it's inextricably linked in terms of how those come together, how has working with young people in the community, namely the work you've done, particularly on the south side of Chicago but in a lot of other areas as well, informed who you are in terms of this kind of mission of service and scholarship and research, but again, coming at this in a way in which it's not how we've traditionally been socialized in the academy to operate.

Dr. Stovall: I think for me, working with young folks and families, keeps you humble, right? Because when you're working with ... they don't care if you have a Ph.D.; that does not matter. I mean, if you were experiencing all these things, where the majority of your experience in school has not been to education, so now what does it mean to interrupt that? Right? So for me, it's always starting with that question, but then working with young folks and families keeps you humble to that and saying, you know, what you may have intended to do with this space, or your intentions of this space, may not be the intentions of the folks that you're working with. So you got to get clear on that first-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: For the most responsive.

Dr. Stovall: Exactly. Right. So you got to get clear on that first. So now this thing around staying humble to that process, right? Because you could claim this and travel all around the world and get lauded for this work. You know, it means something to actually be *responsible* to that work and responsible to their work long term. I think the other thing for me that sticks out is that when you talk about a justice condition, and then in my instance when you talk about educational justice that's connected to racial justice and gender justice and housing justice, employment justice, health care justice. You understand, you get a very intimate understanding of how these are struggles in perpetuity, right? There's no end point. Right? And I think that's *really* important because a lot of times people think about the victory of just getting the schools, like, no, that's actually the beginning, right? So this thing around and, you know, even the lessons from the black freedom struggle, right?

It's saying that the end goal was not to have access to voting, health care, education that was actually the beginning, right? So you're struggling to get to the beginning to—

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: A starting line.

Exactly. To determine where you go with this thing. So I think you see that in real time, right? So when you're doing work in schools, community centers, or what have you, you see that struggle in perpetuity because you may get a victory in one way, then the goalposts shift and now the powers that be change whatever condition, and now they're holding you to whatever the thing they changed too. Right? And it's a *perpetual* cycle, right, in terms of how you will always be coming up against that, especially when you're talking about large systems, especially like large city school systems. So I think those lessons have really been clear; that humility and understanding that the struggle is ongoing and perpetual.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Speaking of perpetual struggles, student protests and youth activism in terms of youth and young adults is being witnessed across the country in some cases. It's not a reemergence, it's been a constant, but the media has paid very little attention to particular demographics as they think voice and agency around what are, again, basic kind of needs, social-justice concerns. And namely when

they show up as racial justice, that there's ways in which votes can decouple racial justice from social justice. So, for example, Black Lives Matter and the retort of, well, no, "All lives matter."

And then now we have the recent March for Our Lives. So what are your thoughts relative to what appears to be some cognitive dissonance and a disconnect for some and really kind of seeing the fullness of humanity and being in the full fold of participation for particular communities and not so much for others when we talk about who matters and the extent to which our young people have had enough and are showing up and showing up in good spirit, right? So that the park, when kids, to their credit, there are some that are going, "Well, yeah, we experienced this, but there's communities of color that experienced this time and time again."

Dr. Stovall: The black body has always been positioned as this normalized site of gratuitous punishment. Right? So when you think about the work of Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton, they always talk about this, Frank Wilderson, they always talk about this idea of this receptacle of gratuity, that naturalized receptacle of gratuitous punishment. And I think we have these historical ebbs and flows when folks say, "Enough is enough," right? And I think what gets in the ebbs and flows is a bunch of pacification, right? So you get some laws or what have you that anesthetize you into thinking that things are improving and then you're shocked right back into reality. Right? And I think what we can now take from those young folks is saying the young people are reminding us that America is not this new thing. America is showing us to be what it is always been. Right?

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: And it's not post-racial.

Dr. Stovall: And it's not post racial. Right? So this thing around being so clear about that, right? So all these moments are the reminders that America is showing it to be what it's always been. Right? And this, I think when we connect that to history and not saying, so I think as you pointed out, when folks in Black Lives Matter, folks in Black Youth Project 100, Dream Defenders, when they're saying, look, "This thing is nothing new," right? We have to pay attention. Right? And I think that's the thing that folks resist the most. The 24-hour news cycle [tricks] us into thinking that, "Oh, this is this new tragedy." And folks are saying, "No, this is a perpetual tragedy." Right? And we just haven't connected it. We haven't paid attention to it. So I think-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: And a basic right, the kids should show up in a learning space and feel safe.

Dr. Stovall: Period. Right? I mean just those basic things, right? And not Santorum saying madness, life. They should learn CPR. I mean, just the ridiculousness of that. Right? But-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: And arm the teachers, too.

Dr. Stovall:

Right, yeah. But another point, because we know what that means too: More black and brown death, period. Because someone's going to say they felt threatened, right? So this thing around how we even put that into this larger conversation around this perpetual rationalization of black death, right? And now young folks are pushing back and saying enough is enough. Right? And the hope is by the powers that be is that they can anesthetize it, right? In terms of now folks thinking that things have calmed down, but again, history has shown us we will be quickly reminded, right? This is *always* the thing and there's a trauma in the reminding, right? For me, as somebody who does this work around race, Hurricane Katrina, maybe understand things very clearly, right? Like, do not get it twisted. Right? And I think for me it was this idea of you have to pay attention to the *function* of systems, right? The *function* of FEMA was to say these bodies are disposable, and because they are disposable, here's how we'll move. Right? Puerto Rico with Hurricane Maria is the same thing. These bodies are disposable. Here's how we would demonstrate their disposability. Right? And I think those things, when people start to respond to that and actually have that in the forefront, and that's my hope for these groups of young people who are showing up and showing out, to say, "Let's be clear about what we're in." Right?

So when we talk about creating new things, they have to be new things, right? And I think *that's* the energy that I'm appreciative of because it's reminding us that, you know, you can't, as the eldest say, "You can't let your butt get soft because you're now on a softer chair," right? You've still got to understand what this thing is, right? And when we understand what this thing is, it pushes us to think about our work differently, right? It challenges us to do our work differently. And I'm very appreciative of young folks for putting that lesson, bringing that lesson back in terms of returning us to our history.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:

So your work also addresses the need to reframe the gap. You underscore the importance of different stakeholders and socially just education, and that this is, again, as you said, is in a perpetual type of cycle. This struggle for quality education is continual. So when considering that roughly half of all undergraduates that are in postsecondary are at community colleges and that the majority of racially minoritized students are not at four-year institutions; they are at community colleges, namely black and brown students. What do you consider the critical social-justice issues in terms of the nexus of access and marginalization and policy for folks being disproportionately affected by segmented opportunities?

Dr. Stovall:

Yeah, I think this is a big thing, and this is kind of this perpetual question, right? This kind of pipeline question. So in Illinois we have this articulation agreement, right, between all the universities that's enforced in *such strange ways*, right? I mean, there's no through line to it, right? So now this thing around really doing that coordination around the articulation, right? So this possibility, because I always think about Chicago, so now, if you are a student in Chicago Public Schools, you've graduated with 3.0, you can go to city colleges for free. The issue is, and one of my good friends who's a counselor at one of the city

colleges, and he was like, the issue is we don't allow that articulation for them. Right? It's still this kind of crisis of capital where those students are still of jettisoned into low-wage service-sector work. Right?

So now this thing around what is that articulation, right? Because if we're not careful, these things become self-fulfilling prophecies, right? A young person comes in, they go to a community college and now they try to get their articulation agreement together. Too much paperwork, not enough through lines. They don't have access. And then he'd just say, "All right, look, let me just go ahead, pick up this associates and be good." That grouping of people, I think, is much larger than we pay attention to. And I think now when we talk about policies, the articulation is one space, but then the other space is seeing this grouping of students as viable students in a four-year situation, and this is your work.

What we know is that those students from community colleges that matriculate into four-year schools, especially students of color, end up doing much better because they actually ... and it's something there about them having to navigate all these different spaces, so now when they come into a four-year situation, they're very clear about what it is they're trying to do, and because they are clear, that pathway is clear, they end up doing better. So I think-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: In contrast to the first time in any institution for a four-year ...

Dr. Stovall: Yes. So now they do better, to your point, especially for first-generation students. So now when we think about policy, those policies should now be explicit around those articulation agreements. They should also be explicit around all of the access to funding because this does, even though you've cut, theoretically, the financial burden in half, you still have a financial burden. So this thing around really looking at the assistance that's available for folks in those spaces. But I think more so than anything, and this is what I've seen at a number of different spaces, it's just that, through line of articulation. I see so many folks just get lost in that space. I can remember some of my students who were trying to get into nursing programs, and I just remember how challenging it was for them to make that matriculation from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, still staying on that nursing track.

And there were some folks, the College of Nursing at UIC, also recognize that, like, look, now we got a whole pathway for folks to actually take these courses so you don't have to take classes again into these spaces. And that was just them as a forward-thinking department to say, "Okay, we have this need, we can actually do this." But I think that thing around, the challenge is now all these numbers are placed on students' heads, right? So now colleges are not even quasi-businesses, right? They're full-on businesses and now this kind of dollar value that's placed on young people's heads doesn't allow them to see, okay, if we're talking about retention and completion, there's a different equation here because as a business-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: And just getting them in the door ...

Dr. Stovall: Right. Because the business model of colleges is you make your money just by getting a bunch of freshmen in the door.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: [Makes a comment]

Dr. Stovall: Yep. So that thing around ... so your budget is essentially determined by freshmen enrollment. Right? So this thing around thinking about that differently and I think you have some spaces that have really been forward thinking with that, but I think that challenge is those articulation agreements in terms of making sure that there sound in terms of what people want to do.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Okay. As we wrap up in closing, what call to action or advice would you share with our listeners in terms of engaging in and advancing equitable education for diverse youth and adults?

Dr. Stovall: I would say the biggest thing, do not be afraid to interrupt and challenge what has been touted as traditional research, right? I mean, this thing around really asking deeper questions around what is it that we're trying to address? How we're trying to address it and how we try to address it for the purpose of improvement. And then being *very* clear about developing why you do it and what you do it for. Right? Because I think this is the conundrum often of the academy, right? So we get appeased with things like tenure, and when we're doing community-based work, the responsibility is not towards tenure. Rather, the responsibility is for the people that you say you care about. Right? So what is the work that you're doing for the people that you say you care about? I think that's a very different positioning, but we always have to locate our work there. Right? What does this mean for the people that I care about? Right? And not being fearful about locating; I work in those spaces.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: All right. Dr. David Stovall, thank you so much.

Dr. Stovall: Thank you all so much, again, for having me. Yep.

Dr. Heather Fox: Tune in next month when Jason Keist at OCCRL, talks with Dr. J. Lockwood, associate vice president for faculty diversity and inclusion and distinguished professor of education at San Diego State University, about engaging and supporting male students of color. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dub Lab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.