Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 38: Advancing Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Education

Announcer: Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, the director of OCCRL, talks with Dr. Paul Gorski about advancing racial equity work, as well as about diversity and inclusion efforts in education.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Today on Democracy's College podcast, we have joining us Dr. Paul Gorski. Paul is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and Ed Change. He has 20 years of experience helping educators strengthen their equity efforts in classrooms, schools, and districts. He's worked with educators in 48 states and a dozen countries. He's published more than 70 articles, has written and co-written or co-edited 12 books on various aspects of educational equity, including *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* and case studies on diversity and social justice education. He is the author of the Multicultural Pavilion, an online compendium of free resources for educators.

Thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Gorski: Ah, happy to be with you.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Well, you know, your work has addressed efforts to advance racial equity in education, and in some recent conversations with others, I was talking with them about how one of the ways in which we can think about diversity efforts, equity efforts, inclusion efforts is by not to conflate them. And oftentimes these terms are used synonymously. When you think about ways to do true DEI work to do recruitment and retention of people of color in the academy, one of the things you've noted is that it's important to do away with racism first. Can you tell our listeners more about that?

Dr. Gorski: Yeah, so on the diversity, equity, and inclusion work, I always think that the equity piece and the justice piece needs to be foregrounded. To me, in the end, racial equity or racial justice work is about identifying and eliminating racism

and every way that it operates around us, so interpersonally, institutionally, structurally. And to the rest of the diversity stuff, the inclusion stuff, I think might be *pieces* of that, but I think it's very easy to sort of drift off into celebrating diversity or talking about inclusive practices while we leave racist policies and practices in place.

So, to me, the first question is how is racism operating here? That's the *first* question we should ask, or whatever issue that we're working on: How is heterosexism operating here? Or ableism, how is it operating here? And then what are we going to do to eliminate it at its roots? To me, that's really what equity work is and if we're not doing that, it doesn't matter what we call it, we're really not doing equity work.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Yeah. As you were speaking, it reminded me of a close colleague and friend, actually our associate director for the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, Anjalé Welton, who does a lot of work around anti-racist change in schools, particularly the K-12 school setting. She also, I think, would concur with you that in order to achieve racial equity and education, folks have to do more than just individual mind shifts in terms of their mindsets.

And so, how do we shift to a more anti-racist ideology? It seems as if folks kind of tiptoe around wanting to do more than have a commitment to diversity to actually making profound anti-racist changes in schools. What kind of leadership attributes could folks have or offer or should be fostered that might actually lend themselves to more institutional change for racial equity?

Dr. Gorski: In the framework that Katy Swalwell and I developed, we talk about some basic principles, and we call them principles of equity literacy, and in essence that's what they are. It's like what are just some basic guidelines that can help me understand and identify racial inequity and then really focus on eliminating that?

I'll just describe a couple of them. One of them we call the Fix Injustice, Not Kids Principle. That principle is basically the idea that our equity efforts should not, not a single ounce of it, should be spent trying to adjust the mindsets or the behaviors or the values or the engagement of kids. It's not about fixing students or families who have been marginalized; it's about identifying marginalizing systems, structures, policies, and practices and eliminating them. That helps us avoid all of these popular things that are really about how can we help students of color moderate their emotions or have more grit? To me, that's the opposite of the equity conversation.

Another one of the basic principles is the Direct Confrontation Principle. The idea there is that, in the end, like I said earlier, equity work is about identifying and eliminating inequity and injustice. So the Direct Confrontation Principle basically says that there's no path to equity that is not based on a direct confrontation with inequity. So we have to stop dancing around it. We have to

stop thinking we can celebrate diversity our way to equity, and name how racism operates and eliminate that.

So being able to take some of these basic principles and commit to them as leaders, I think keeps us with a tighter focus on racial equity and racial justice so that we're not tiptoeing around it.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: I appreciate that. You know, I was thinking in reference to your equity literacy framework, it is refreshing in that it is a departure from what is often referenced as what could be culturally proficient or what might be folks thinking they're multiculturally efficacious, when in fact there's a disconnect whereby those that perceive themselves as multiculturally efficacious or culturally proficient, actually, sometimes unwittingly, perpetuate that deficit-minded frame of reference and lens.

There's also where there's the right rhetoric without actually redressing and taking a right course of action, kind of commitment without the follow-through. What readily comes to mind is what I've heard you describe as students being taken on diversity and equity detours are other ways that we see this kind of performativity in K-12 and in the academy without the transformative practices that are really necessary. So how can we move beyond what is performative in terms of optics of institutional transformation in lieu of there being none?

Dr. Gorski: Well and I think a lot of this is about the will and commitment of leadership. I think part of the problem is what is rewarded professionally, culturally, socially is the optics of it. So I say, "Oh, look, we have this neat program over here, we have this neat student assembly over there," or whatever it is. That's the sort of thing that's rewarded, so that's what people do. What's not rewarded is "Here is a policy that we've known for generations is a racist policy. We're not going to change it because we're worried that white parents are going to be upset or white students are going to be upset if we change it."

I think, again, a lot of that gets down to the will of leadership and a lot of it gets down to ideology. It's hard to imagine that changing as long as, in the end, people's commitment is more to the illusion of equity than to actual equity. I think that's what we're up against.

One thing that I noticed in schools that I work with is that schools that kind of build their equity work around cultural competence, cultural proficiency, multiculturalism, those sorts of things, tend to do very fluffy versions. It's almost, in some cases, like that has been chosen as a way to get us out of talking about racism.

And one thing that we have to recognize is racism is really not a cultural problem. It's not like I'm going to be racist toward you because we have a cultural misunderstanding. I'm sure that happens, but in the end, racism at the

bigger level is really a power and oppression problem. And power and oppression problems can't be solved just by appreciating cultural differences.

You know, I can appreciate and to some extent understand and celebrate and even esteem the cultures of Mexican American students, and I think that in a way that's a positive step, but it's a positive step that's on a different plane from the equity and justice plane. Because I can esteem the culture of Mexican American people. First of all, that's ridiculous to say, in a way, because Mexican American people do not all share the same culture. So that's part of the confusion around that. When people say the African American learning style, it's ridiculous.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: It's as if there's this monolithic experience.

Dr. Gorski: Right. And nobody would say the white-people learning style because it's ridiculous to think all white people have the same learning style. But in my diversity ed course that I took in my education master's program, that's basically how it was organized: "Here's what you have to know about African American kids and how they learn. Here's what you have to know about Mexican American … "

I think it is valuable for me to understand and appreciate and esteem the cultures of individual students and even some identity groups. That's different from recognizing all the ways that Mexican American students are marginalized, recognizing the racism that's experienced by Mexican American students and African American students. Those are on completely different planes of understanding. So I can appreciate somebody's culture and be racist at the same time, and I think that's the problem with those models.

Now there are some models that are based around the language of culture, like "relevant," "culturally responsive." Gloria Ladson-Billings is one of my absolute heroes in this work, and her framework is really based around racial justice and ethic of racial justice, but even *she* has written that when she goes into schools that say they're doing culturally relevant stuff, that *really* what they're doing is usually kind of a fluffy version of cultural competence.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Some racial voyeurism.

Dr. Gorski: Right, racial voyeurism. And they've taken the racial justice piece out. *That's* the problem more than the model itself, I think.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: One of my favorite pieces among many of your works was the piece "Savage Unrealities: Uncovering Classism in Ruby Payne's Framework." For me, it was kind of like I was long distance, high fiving, fist bumping, giving you a pound, like say that, yes, amen, hallelujah, because I have found myself in a place where I was continuously kind of bumping into or confronting folks in conversation around the lack of interrogation around issues of classism, the embedding of

intersectionality within that. And so, when I was able to come across that piece about 14, 15 years ago, it felt *really* just revelatory, and it felt organic, and it felt like it's about time that somebody is calling out this framework that Ruby has on poverty.

So one of the questions I have was in addressing poverty and class equity, because I think sometimes, or at least in my experience, I have had folks tell me, "Well, I'm all about social justice, but not so much *racial* justice, because really it's more about class." And so there's this tiptoeing and dancing around the elephant in the room in terms of race and how race actually doesn't mitigate but can in fact exacerbate issues of class disparities.

But I wanted to ask you about, in your work addressing poverty and class equity, in lieu of racial and gender minoritization, and I know, again, you've been critical of Ruby Payne's work, but can you talk about these different blind spots that educators have in both K-12 and college university settings that kind of placates to this model that perpetuates this understanding that there is almost this monolithic kind of experience when it comes to class disparities, when not taking into account the intersectional aspects of folks lives that, again, can create even more pronounced opportunity gaps?

Dr. Gorski: The first thing I think that's important to acknowledge is that I do think there's a tendency often, for white people in particular, to want to go to the class and poverty piece as a way to get around talking about race. So I've been really careful in my work when I'm writing about class and poverty to say, “We cannot have a sensible conversation about class and poverty without talking about race.” Those things are linked and there's *no way* to pull them apart. I think that's really important. It's about race, it's about class, it's about all of these sorts of things, but we can't allow the conversation about class to be the detour away from talking about race.

The other thing about this that this makes me think of is, although I know some of the stuff I wrote came across as a critique of Ruby Payne, I think the *bigger* thing I was critiquing was seeing that a lot of people who are in my circles who are otherwise pretty equity-minded, that they were buying into this set of ideas, which was both racist and full of class stereotypes. And, you know, I decided to write about that. The article was really about challenging people who sort of otherwise seem to care about quote, unquote diversity or whatever it is.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Egalitarian and liberal.

Dr. Gorski: Yeah, so like on that, and at the same time, I'm buying into all of this sort of rehash of the bootstraps and the-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Pull yourself up. Yeah.

Dr. Gorski: And that the problem is the cultures and mindsets of families experiencing poverty, if we could just change *them*. That was really my concern more than Ruby Payne. My concern was how is anybody looking at this and thinking it sounds right? I just could not understand that. It was interesting because, historically, my focus has been much more around racial equity and racial justice, but someone needed to respond to that in a public way.

It's interesting too because at that time, I had gone to Rethinking Schools a couple of years, I had gone to Teaching Tolerance, and nobody wanted to take it on. And Rethinking Schools didn't publish my article until about two years after I wrote it because one of the people on the Rethinking Schools' board decided to write an article also critiquing it. So even these organizations, at the time, were not willing to take that on.

I think that there's a socialization around class and poverty, and also around race, for a socialization into a deficit view. So it's not we have to eliminate the racism, but we have to change the culture or mindset of students of color so that they can survive a racist institution.

And again, I think there are a lot of people who have pretty good critical analysis of a lot of equity stuff but are still stuck on *that*. And I think that's what made the Ruby Payne thing popular. That's what makes grit popular and growth mindset popular and trauma informed practices and social-emotional, in the sense that schools are using those things as a way to not have to talk about racism. If we're using trauma-informed practices through a racial justice lens, *then* they can be beneficial, same with restorative practices.

But I think the biggest thing that people miss is they're just looking for a shiny new thing that they can just implement. And if that shiny new thing is designed in a way that supports their existing view of things, which is we have to fix students of color or we have to fix students experiencing poverty, then they grab a hold of it.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Yeah, as you we're talking about fixing folks of color, fixing folks that are living in poverty, it again, for me, conjures up in many regards because the vast majority of K-12 educators, and actually the college and university faculties reflect this as well, where upwards of four-fifths are white. And so, that whole fixing is a dog whistle too, kind of white savior complex, and again, very deficit-laden types of orientations. And so, I've appreciated how you've sought to debunk some of the myths around the culture of poverty.

And then, in doing the work that you've done over the course of two decades, advancing racial justice, working toward equitable, racially equitable, student outcomes, that can be taxing in terms of many folks that do this work, they could get burned out. And so, I'm wondering, as an activist scholar and educational leader, how do you mitigate burnout? What advice do you have for those folks that are seeking to advocate on behalf of, and work tirelessly as

activist scholars and educators, in advancing racial equity, how to not burn out and stay the course?

Dr. Gorski: You know, one thing I think that's important for me to acknowledge is that my whiteness and my maleness I think protect me from some of the causes of burnout that people of color, who are saying very similar things to what I'm saying, are experiencing. So when I walk into a room and I say, "Identify the racism, eliminate the racism, stop with all the fluffy multicultural arts and crafts fair stuff," I'm looked at differently than if you walked in the room and said the same thing. So there's a way that I'm protected from some of the causes of burnout.

I think people burn out a lot more quickly if they are trying to do work in isolation. I think about teachers, you know, and a lot of teachers will say, "Well, there are like one or two people in my school who care about this and we're up against everyone else." And I'm like, "Find the other person and build community with that person, and find other people maybe in the larger district." I *need* to have people around me who can understand what I'm experiencing so I can say, "Well, this happened, and this," and they're not going to say, "Oh, you're being too sensitive." They're going to understand what's happening. I think that's really important.

I've done this research about activist burnout, and another thing I'll say as a white person doing this work, my colleague Noura Erakat and I, we did this study where we interviewed racial justice activists of color who had experienced burnout from doing racial justice activism. We talked to them about what are the causes of their burnout. What was interesting is that for many of them, their number-one cause of burnout revolved around the attitudes and behaviors of *white* racial justice activists and their own movements or organizations.

So a lot of it had to do with white people who wanted, socially, to be engaged in racial justice work but hadn't done the work on themselves they needed to do. So they're coming in splashing their privilege and fragility all over people of color. So again, I'm not talking about just white people in general; I'm talking about white people who see themselves as doing racial justice work.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Right.

Dr. Gorski: One thing I think that we have to get away from is this notion of coping with burnout, which is everyone's kind of got to go into their own corner and take care of themselves. I think that is part of it, but it's also about how we treat one another.

Another thing that came out of my research on activist burnout: about 60% of the women activists who I've interviewed who've experienced activist burnout have experienced sexual harassment or even sexual assault from male activists. So if we're not addressing *that*, then there's going to be a lot of burnouts, no

matter how much self-cares is happening. So we got to make sure that we're working on how we're treating one another as activists as well.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: In exploring ways that racial justice activism serves as consciousness-raising and that we're in a time where it seems as if there's a need for resistance, or at least that has come to the forefront, can you share with us on-the-ground perspectives in terms of how people can readily think through, particularly as we think about the nuances of context and how this plays out differently.

So, for example, my colleague J. Luke Wood and I recently wrapped up doing a series of Advancing Racial Justice and Equity Institutes in Community Colleges because much of what we were dismayed about is we hear about some of this in terms of racial tensions, race relations, issues around racial justice or lack thereof in K-12 spaces, with four-year campuses, but there hadn't been much attention paid to community colleges. Half of all undergrads are in community colleges. Community colleges have a lot more racial ethnic diversity in many regards than their four-year sister schools. And so they're not exempt, they're not immune. And we've seen, in terms of some of the data from the DOE, that there's been a spike in racial hate crimes at two-year institutions.

And so, I'm just wondering, in terms of what we're seeing as, specifically in the context of community and campus activism, intersectional activism, how you might talk through how to enable and engage organizers and students around being activists that can effectively resist within different contexts. Are there any suggestions or recommendations you have for them on the ground? Because I see where there are a lot of active resistance efforts aimed at transforming individual institutions, but again, nothing that is really speaking to kind of a larger scale in how these things aren't necessarily siloed but are more systemic and pipeline concerns in terms of how we're trying to advance justice.

Dr. Gorski: You know, it's tough because it feels like so much equity and justice work is so localized.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Right.

Dr. Gorski: So wherever people are, they're trying to address that *place* where they are. And one of the things I think about a lot is, like, the difference between mitigative change, like here's a racist society so I'm going to adjust this institution, but the institution is still sitting in a racist society, so what is the impact of that?

Now some of the cool things that I've seen are movements that have cut across different sectors where you have people doing work around racial justice in schools, people doing work around police brutality and how racism is operating. There are people looking at racism in the judicial system and sort of organizing together to inform each other's work so that there's more of a united front

moving forward or like a shared arc of the work. I think that sort of cross sector organizing is really important.

And then also what happens is if I'm doing an event that's focused on racism and the judicial system, then I might get some backup from the education people because we're working together on this other thing. I think that can be really helpful.

I think a lot about working with teachers, and a lot of them see their sphere of influence as their classroom. That's my whole sphere of influence and what they really struggle with, and I think teacher education has something to do with that because we're so focused on “here are five instructional strategies,” you know, we're not generally giving teachers a bigger structural view. But even if I want to do the best I can within this classroom, I still have to understand how institutional racism is impacting the students who are walking into my class, and my relationship with them and that sort of thing.

We can think of our roles as people who are teaching about this stuff to educators, whether they're working in P-12 schools or community colleges or wherever, that it's okay to see your classroom as your sphere of influence. But to enable you to help grow that sphere of influence, I need to help give you a bigger context for that. And we need to have conversations at that level, and we need to treat, especially P-12 educators, as though they're thinking people and not just technicians who can handle those bigger conversations.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: If you were to give a call to action to educators in terms of how they might go about fostering racial justice and equity, how they could unmask white supremacy and privilege and oppression in schools, what kind of call to action or action steps might you charge them with?

Dr. Gorski: I think it's really important to organize because, again, if we're all siloed in our different institutions, it's much harder to do that bigger structural work.

I also think, especially for white people who want to be involved in that, there's got to be a lot of self-education, and that's got to happen *before* we insert ourselves into these movements. If I am going to insert myself into that movement, I must be willing to defer to people who have more expertise than me. I can't go into this racial justice movement thinking, "Well, I'm going to be in this movement as long as you can give me a leadership position in the movement." We should be following the lead of the people who are fighting for their liberation, and then I as a white person become liberated through engaging myself, and I have to do the work so that I don't enter that movement in a way that's going to slow it down or create burnout for activists of color.

So, I think organizing and then realizing it's okay that there are some people who are saying, "My work is going to be how do I develop anti-racist curriculum for my students?" Perfectly reasonable that that's going to be your work. And

other people need to be like, "I am going to address structural racism and school funding," and it's got to be okay that they're working on that. We need *more* people working on that. We have too few people working on that.

But if we can all be in communication with each other and organizing together and supporting one another instead of what usually happens is critiquing one another, like, "You don't know what it's like to be on the ground in a classroom"; if we can all get together and say, "Together we're going to cover it all and here's how we're going to cover it all." If we're all also doing the individual work that we need to do, I think that's the goal.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: That *is* the goal. Thank you so much, Dr. Paul Gorski, founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and Ed Change, for spending time with us today on Democracy's College.

Dr. Gorski: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Announcer: Tune in next month when Chequita Brown, a research assistant at OCCRL, talks with Maddy Day about the Fostering Success Michigan initiative and the impact of campus-based support programming on foster care collegians' postsecondary access and retention. Day is a consultant for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative within the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as well as the cofounder of the Champions Program at the University of Washington.

Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence and education for all students.