Morality, Justice, and Leadership in K-16 Education: The Need for "Telling Better Stories"

Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

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TRANSCRIPTION

David: The name of our podcast is *Morality, Justice, Leadership in K-16 Education: The Need for "Telling Better Stories."* Within this podcast, the panelists will critically engage in an interdisciplinary and intersectional storytelling, (counter)storytelling, about "what counts as truth" and "how we come to truth," and how these processes impact disabled—dis/abled, Black, Indigenous, and youth of Color students individually, interpersonally, structurally, and politically within the K-16 education. Individually and collectively, we personally and professionally provide frameworks, discourse given our identities and positionalities from our respective fields, for future justice praxis. We do this around the following ideas: morality, justice, and leadership.

David: Welcome everyone! My name is David Hernández-Saca and I'm an Assistant Professor of Disability Studies in Education at the University of Northern Iowa. I investigate the role of affect and emotions in teacher learning as it relates to social justice issues. I am here with two of my colleagues from the University of Northern Iowa, and one from the University of New Hampshire, in an interdisciplinary collaboration. I'm going to throw it over now to Scott, to introduce himself.

Scott E.: Hi, my name is Scott Ellison, I'm an Associate Professor of Social and Cultural Foundations at the University of Northern Iowa. Happy to be here.

Joyce: Hey, my name's Joyce Levingston. I am in the Ed.D. program of Allied Health Recreation and Community Services at the University of Northern Iowa, and I am ecstatic to be here.

Scott M.: And I am Scott McNamara, and I am a brand new faculty member at the University of New Hampshire and in the Kinesiology Department, and my area of specialty is physical activity and physical education for people with disabilities.

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David: Great, thank you! So, I'm going to also turn it over to Scott E., again, to get us started.

Scott E.: All right, well, I mean David asked me to talk about storytelling, and that's kind of the theme of what we're up to today. And it's…for me, a lot of this comes out of work I've been doing, recently, you know. I've been thinking a lot about my approach to research and teaching lately, and to do a shameless plug, I just published a book called *Education, Crisis, and the Discipline of the Conjuncture*, in which the last two chapters address those two topics so. Considering I just finished that, and I'm just putting my classes together for the fall, this is something I really been thinking about, so.

Scott E.: What I want to talk about right now is my teaching. Okay, and what does it mean to tell better stories in the classroom? And what I'm really up to, is I'm trying to push back against what I think are like two pernicious trends in education, one is instrumentalism. This focus on content, and most hated phrase "best practices," right, as though teaching is a recipe. The other one that I'm trying to push back against is this liberal ideal of social justice. And what I mean by that is through…and it's related to the first one, it's technocratic, right? It's this idea, through better curriculum, better classroom management, things of that nature, we're going to achieve some measure of social justice.

Scott E.: And I think there's lots wrong with that, but for me the easiest way to talk about what's wrong is that it—it's just about tweaking things, and never actually questions the institutions of K-12 education, university education, and whatnot. And, you know, we've been at these technocratic reforms for decades. Basically my whole life. And we really don't have much to show for it in terms of the deep societal issues that we have, and how those issues play out in classrooms. So for me, what I'm trying to do is I'm—I'm—I'm not thinking about content so much

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anymore. I'm thinking about how my students relate to…and my students are future teachers for the most part. But I'm interested in how they relate to their profession: to teaching, to schools, and ultimately to society. And I try to do this through storytelling.

Scott E.: So what I mean by that, is I try to take the stories that my students bring with them, the common sense ideas that they bring with them from their life experience, but also what they're learning in teacher education courses. And I try to do a couple of things: first, we go over…we talk about those stories. We flesh it out, and make sure that we're all on the same page. And then I demonstrate…I try to demonstrate, why they're problematic. And then I try to tell a better story. So, what does that mean? Well, for me, what that means is I build context around things. So, I take something like STEM education, that's the thing everybody's talking about today, right? And it's the royal road to social justice as well. And I try to start constructing context around it, and think about it, like I'm reverse engineering an onion. I take the story itself, and I tell another story, and then I tell another story, and each one kind of expands out. And my goal isn't necessarily to teach content, although of course I am teaching content, but my ultimate goal is to take the things that my students bring with them, and to demonstrate that it's problematic. To kind of cultivate in my students a mis-relation to what they take is commonsensical.

Scott E.: And I think that way of relating to their profession, relating to schools, and ultimately how they relate to social reality, I think that's way more important than teaching content that I can measure and plot on a graph, if that makes sense. So to me, it's all about dominant stories, deconstructing those stories, in trying to—to quote Lawrence Grossberg, "Tell a Better Story." And that's really all I'm up to these days. So, I think my job was to kind of kick off the conversation, and I hope I did. So, I'll turn it over to smarter people than I.

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Scott M.: Well, you failed on that, that last part, but I haven't…so you know I was remembering our last conversation, and I remember we talked…I think what brought this conversation apart is we actually talked about the need to have storytelling in our world, to push social justice things. And I actually wanted to maybe push back on something that you're saying there. And we, I think, said that…or maybe I've read this afterwards, or something, but that conservatives and conservative kind of media is actually has dominated the ability to tell better stories, and oftentimes that's why they're kind of doing certain things: they're actually telling better stories, because it…but, in a way though, so just kind of making sure that we tell stories and such. It's like if the…sometime that can be like rifting, you know what I mean? Like we can...we…if I'm good at rhetoric, and I'm good at storytelling, I can get people…like Charles Manson was good, at storytelling, you know what I mean? Like, that doesn't mean that the content's good, or that the—that the, you know, the subject matter's good. So, like when you say all that about…that we have to kind of make this good story or make a better story, how does that fit in alignment with kind of quality control in there, too, and not just "I'm a good speaker?"

Scott E.: Oh yeah, agreed. So, it comes down to those contexts, like how rigorously you construct the context around things. So, for instance I use STEM education as an example. So, one of the ways I do that is, in terms of the dominant story, is who's telling the story? So, we dive into Silicon Valley, and the very strange culture that emerged from the 70s today…to today, right? The World Economic Forum, and how the Davos set talk about it, how corporate America talks about. How the state of Iowa talks about it, for example. So, I tried to layer on these contexts, so it's not necessarily about rhetoric. And in terms of telling a better story, it's about taking something that is kind of taught uncritically, and is accepted, that there is a STEM crisis, for example. And that, if we fix this STEM crisis, we're going to preserve our economic future, and we're going to solve, you know, for example, racial and

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economic inequalities, and things of that nature. And I try to…as I build those contexts, I'm demonstrating why there's not a lot of evidence that that's actually true, does that make sense? So yeah, I see exactly where you're coming from.

Scott M.: So, you and your…and just to like kind of paraphrase…and I think at first like—like a lot of big words and big ideas came at me, at least. And I was trying to decipher all that, but like, you're kind of saying that you're showing like a lot of different perspectives on stories, and then trying to deconstruct certain stories and make sure one story is better than the other.

Scott E.: Correct.

Scott M.: Or—or not better, but more true or has more truth and experience with it.

Scott E.: Sure, yeah. Yep sorry, I'm bad about $5 words.

Scott M.: Yeah.

Joyce: Yeah, this kind of reminds me of, you know, when we talk about dismantling hegemonies. And when you both were speaking of stories, when Scott M. was speaking, what came to my mind was: it's not who's, like, telling the better stories; but it's whose stories are—are structurally in place, right? And whose stories have the media backing, right? And the media push. Whose stories are wrote in textbooks as stereotypes. You know, as…over the last summer, I was working with a group of kids, and they were predominantly all Black kids. And we had two kids that weren't Black. And the two kids that weren't Black, they were acting out in ways where…all—all of our staff were Black, too, we were like "what is going on?" And we sat down, and we had a conversation. And I brought to the table that these kids are thinking that they're acting how they think Black people act, due to how

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we've been portrayed through media. Through storytelling, through textbooks. And it became very clear that that was a big part of that. So, I just think about when we do have some…when we do have moments of interrupting peoples' thoughts, or peoples' automatic way that they would automatically assume things, that word disruption comes to mind. As well as dismantling hegemonies, because I know we can say things like "this is a great campus," but I could come on there and be like, "I never had one good semester at campus." My story could be totally different.

Joyce: And then I just want to add a note, too: I did take a class with Dr. Ellison at UNI, and I can remember in his class that I don't…I think all of us were so, honestly colonized, and that we hadn't had an introduction to someone questioning white textbook authors. Someone questioning research, or someone questioning why certain research isn't credible, versus researchers' whose stuff is just credible. And so, it was a shock to us in it…and I remember being kind of frustrated, because I remember not understanding sometimes exactly what it was he was saying or getting at, and it would click later, like in a life experience. And when I think about what we did learn in his class, is as…even as a Black woman, for me it was emotionally exhausting, because no one had ever taught me that before, and no one had ever, I feel like, revealed, showed what was behind certain curtains. But once my thinking was disrupted, and once I had a moment of awakening, it made me just go deeper into it, so I followed up by taking similar classes.

Scott E.: Wow that's—that's a hell of a compliment! Thank you Joyce. Because that's exactly what I'm trying to do. The way you talk…you spoke about it, in terms of your thinking. The thinking is more important, I think, than the content. Because the way you relate to your profession, the world, and so forth, will inform how you act in it, right? So instead of just taking things, for instance, that come from administration, through a school district, or something of that nature, you're going to think twice about it. You're going to look for alternative stories about this, and it's

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just a different way of approaching scholarship, teaching and so forth, so thank you that's—that's a compliment.

Scott M.: Scott E. why—why do you believe that there is this focus on content versus critical thinking, which is what I think you're really getting at? It…like from my mindset it's A. I think that it's the public wants like, kind of like, very specific measure...quote unquote measurable outcomes, and then B. I think it's easier. Well, what do you think?

Scott E.: I would agree. The part about the public wanting it, though, is, I always think, when we talk about public demands, public demands are always shaped, right? I mean, that's what political campaigns do, that's what marketing campaigns do. And we often lose track of that. So, I think that's cultivated in a way, and I think a lot of it comes down to kind of a technocratic logic, right? That, "well, we want to be able to order things in a rational way," that we want to like say, "well, this is what we want them to know we're going to deliver it like this," and then at the end, we want to be able to show, "hey, look what they've learned," and everybody can go, "ooh and ahh."

Scott E.: But I think, although…I mean it's not an old conversation. Max Weber was talking about how this is a trap, right? That, in a way, you need those kinds of instrumental logics in order to organize anything, whether it's a car company, a university, or a small business, right? Or even a religious institution. But it comes at a cost, and that cost is that it's…he called it the "Iron Cage," right? That we're all kind of trapped in this way, and it's actually a limit, a self-imposed limit, that we place on ourselves. And you know, that's just Weber, you can look at it in psychology. You know the old adage of "be careful what you measure, because that's all you're going to end up caring about." Things of that nature. So, I think it—it comes down to a technocratic logic.

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David: Yeah, I think one of the things that this conversation is making me think about is the nature of thought, and the nature of theory, and the interrelationship between theory and practice. And how important this is to our podcast theme around morality, justice, leadership, and telling better stories, as it relates to, right, the praxis, the critical thinking and feeling that is going on in our minds and in our hearts in this time in history. As our first podcast also alluded to, in terms of, you know, in terms of the multiple social justice crises and pandemics that we're experiencing. But especially, at least for me for Black and Brown communities and students, that I come in contact with.

David: And that Joyce alluded to in terms of what is centered, is those white, upper-class, able-bodied ways of doing and being and norms that are inherently a moral, and justice, and leadership issue. But I don't think it's been framed in the sort of, like, long game that is our institution of public education in such a way. That, I think, that's why I was nervous and excited before this podcast, because the language that we're co-creating right now together, that will inform our future moral actions and ethical decisions, I think, for me, I situate them based off of my personal identities. And, and how this is also identity work, but identity work is not enough. We need to go beyond identity work, because I think Joyce's comment that the lived experience that she was mentioning is also connected to the identity, the stickiness of identity, where it can afford and constrain our self-determination, or our students' self-determination, based off of those stereotypes that are attached to the historical legacies of slavery today, etc.

David: And so, for me, I always try to think about like, in terms of…I never really thought about it in terms of morality before, but in a sense, the student-teacher relationship, or what Scott is talking about, Scott E., the relationship between the instructor, and his or her students, and the content that I'm, right, quote unquote must be learned. But at the same time, the processes that, we are informing, for

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me, socially co-constructing together. And so, I guess, that's one of the things that I've been thinking about as I think about the translation between research to practice. False binary, if you will. But the ways in which, right, our problems of practice, for example, for me, coming from a Disability Studies in Education approach around literacy and learning disabilities. Where we have disproportionality in more students of Color being labeled with learning disabilities, that in a sense, have to do with their psychological functioning in schools. Where perhaps their psychological functioning in their home communities are qualitatively different, but how those cultural practices of literacy outside in their communities, for example, Hip Hop literacy or other forms, that are really centered in their daily lives that are not taken up in dominant institutions such as K-12 and beyond.

David: And really focusing on that as a counter-discourse, as opposed to, right, thinking about these technical logics that Scott E. is also talking about. And so, in a sense, actually this conversation is—is a…is fresh air that that's the sort of inner chatter or dialogue that I have before I act to the best of my ability, right, and my experiences. When I enter into dialogue and generate a new—a new way of conceptualizing and thinking with my students, and also as a teacher educator, the ethical, and moral, and just knowledge, skills, and dispositions that we would want to engender into our future educators. So, I'm just thinking out loud, but based off of what we're saying, I think that's where what counts as a teacher educator around a particular view, that is undergird by critical theory, has been important to my praxis, if you will.

Scott E.: Yeah, I mean I like to—to point towards identity work, because that's something I'm really interested in, in terms of my students, right? The future teachers, whether, you know, regardless of what kind of classroom they're working in. And I guess the way I would think about it is, I think I mentioned in previous podcasts that I'm really…my works informed by Stuart Hall, and he talks about if you're

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doing political work, you're doing ideological work—or you're not doing political work, right? So in terms of identity, our students' identity, it's not about teaching content to them; it's they're navigating all kinds of different stories. So, for instance in disability studies, they might be navigating…the story they've heard the most is maybe the medical model, right? To tell a different story is to layer on another way, another story, right? And by putting that story on there, you're kind of interrupting that identity work. So, it's not about, "here: here's another model to think about disability;" it's "let's shake up that identity work. Let's add a new story to it." And there's no guarantees as to what's going to come next, but that right there, I think, is—is what it means to do critical work in the classroom.

Scott M.: So, I, you know, I've heard a number of really interesting things here, and—and, you know, we're talking about having a story, we're talking about critical teaching, and thinking, and pedagogies. And then we're talking about research to practice; that term's come up a lot. And I—I think that's often a gap. You know what Scott E.'s talking about right now, I wonder…something that I'm always, like, afraid of, and even like so right now, like, talking about something that's controversial and a hot topic right now, is Critical Race Theory being taught in schools, and that term being a buzz term, and the very politicized word right now.

Scott M.: And I do fear, even when I hear that I, you know, I would contend that that's a great thing for everyone to learn. But it's likely not being taught in many areas, to any real, like, you know… But, with that, though, too, I do worry, from that research to practice, is are our teachers able to teach these things in an proficient way? So, we can say all these things and say, "it's great to have critical pedagogy where they're really, like, thinking about thinking, and teaching about what to think about thinking," but, you know, I—I'm not sure that a lot of our—our…or I wouldn't feel confident and—and especially my beginning teachers, doing that type of

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pedagogy right away. And I wonder that research to practice gap is there as well, like, are they proficient? How do we make them proficient? And I don't know.

Scott E.: Well, I mean I think that's a great point, and that's something I try to talk about with my teacher ed students, is that when you get in the classroom you're going to be constrained in a lot of ways by the institution itself. But the other line of research, which I'm not going to open up because we're running low on time, deals with teachers as policy actors, right? That at some point, if there's going to be change, it's not going to come from the top down. If it does, it'll look…it'll just be repackaged what we're already doing. It's going to have to be ground up, and I think that's, once again, why I'm interested in how these future teachers relate to their practice, relate to the institution, and relate to society as a whole. Because for…the first step of activism, of getting out there and trying to change structures, is to understand the problems. So, another way I talk about telling better stories is mapping the terrain. You got to know the terrain you're navigating to make change. So I know I'm throwing a lot of terms out, and did I mentioned it's all in a book? That's okay; selfless plug.

David: Well, we are running out of time. But I--

Joyce: Can I add one more thing?

David: Yes, please.

Joyce: As a parent that has a son in special education with an IEP: we have to figure out a way to prepare our educators, otherwise they shouldn't be in the field. I feel like they shouldn't be out there teaching, because what happens is our students suffer. And not only our students, but the parents suffer as well; that's our entire community. And so, we have to figure out a way rather that's from the beginning…

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like, I had mentioned earlier, I was in my…I don't know I may have been in the doc program already. I was somewhere in my master's degree or doctorate degree, before I had Dr. Ellison's class, and I will say that Dr. Ellison's class was the first class that I had like that, from maybe even junior college? I didn't have any in junior college, or didn't have any while I was getting my bachelor's degree. So, a lot of times these educators aren't even reaching the level where they are discussing or talking about Critical Race Theory, especially Critical Race Theory in education, right? So, we need to figure out some way, because unfortunately my family has been one of the families to suffer from teachers not being culturally competent, and not only that, but teachers just not allowing my son to be a Black boy.

Scott M.: I am very sorry, can I add one more thing to Joyce's thing about the IEP, I really apologize, because I know… Anyways I was actually at a conference last week, an unnamed conference, and I was a speaker for them to talk about adaptive physical education, and I got…actually, I was in Des Moines last weekend, for a few days. And I spoke to Iowa Special Ed teachers and—and such about including adaptive physical education, and about how it fits in the law, and how to navigate the IEP process in teacher… It was a very great group a Special Ed teachers that I talked to that were very, very interested in doing it correctly. And somebody raised their hand at some point and said, "we don't want to be out of compliance with the law. We want…we want to do what's best for the student, but we didn't know any of this."

Scott M.: And so, like, I think it's a pretty…and I talked to them in the hallway after and it's—it's monumental things… This is a piece that's supposed to be already seen in the federal law, which is what we want, right? And there…they don't have the information, they don't have a structural support. If they didn't put it on the IEP, because many school districts don't have access to an adaptive physical educator,

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which they should by law, it's on their IEP. You have school administrators that basically tell them to take it off, because it would cost them a salary or something. And so, you have these…so I—I just felt like that those words from Special Ed teachers were really powerful of, "we don't want to be out of compliance." So, it's structural, it's all these levels: teacher education, administrators, teachers, parents. And these are gigantic things that we have to move and—and so, so layered.

Joyce: Yeah, I think that we should just start with, like, asking a white teacher to Dougie? Or asking a white teacher to Nae Nae. Let me see you Dougie? Let me see you Nae Nae? Or let me see you Whip? Let me see your Nae Nae? And see how comfortable you are with it? Because if you're not comfortable with that, I feel like we'll try to make up any excuse that we could just to say, like, "we don't have rhythm." You know, just to say, like, you know, like just to admit basically that we are used to things being catered to our comfortability. Because if I said hey let's foursquare line dance, then everyone and start lining up, and you know, trying to kick their heels up. But yeah, I think it is a lot, and I think in special education that's a…not just special—special education, but in physical education, that's where a lot of the connection can come from, especially. I remember most of…I went to a predominantly white elementary school, and I remember PE. It was fun, but it was super white. And I have never foursquared or line danced in my life, except in PE. And also did a lot of other things that you could tell it wasn't…they didn't do anything for my culture. I didn't see anything like that. So, but knowing that a lot of those teachers are also coaches, and also mentors, and also our favorite—our favorite teachers as well, that could be a place where, you know, they were able to start at, you know, or able to penetrate kind of hard as well.

Scott M.: That's what they should be doing; they should be teaching from a variety of cultures, things that are part of their cultures, things that are new to them, and

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dances is a credible way. And sports are incredible ways to teach those in a really…a fun way, yes.

David: So just to wrap it up, I think we're actually ending in a really good conversation, as it really relates to policy and practice, and what counts has policy. Where, in a sense, our teachers need a radically new orientation to what counts as teacher work that goes beyond compliance. And goes beyond the technical, though, in a way that there is skin in the game for everyone, and that there are consequences to our actions as agents in the system regarding discursive, psychological well-being, the emotive, and the material well-being of the current and future generations of Americans. And so, I think that we can no longer sort of have a neutral policy, if you will, or view of policy as if it is not designed by those in power, and so this speaking truth to power, sort of other theme that we're engaging in, that really centers marginalized epistemologies, or ways of knowing, from Black and Brown communities, I think can reframe and really reorient our future teacher candidates, and future teachers, in their teacher work. So, maybe we'll go around and just have…I guess I'll use that as kind of my final two cents, and we'll go around and have folks share their final two cents. Anybody can start.

Joyce: Yeah. I'll go ahead and start. Thanks for having me. It's always a pleasure to work with you all, and I am excited to continue the work that we've all been doing. And I'm excited to read that book Dr. Ellison.

Scott M.: Yeah it's been a pleasure working with you all, and hearing you all speak. I love this kind of free form of talking, thinking, digesting, and in the way of the podcast way of…I really think that this is a really nice, like almost, like model, of how learning really does occur is through these conversations versus, you know, whatever a lot of other ways. So I think it's just an awesome way to kind of let people in on the conversation that allows us to learn and better ourselves.

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Scott E.: Yeah, I'm going to agree. I've learned a lot from you guys, and I'm using that the gender-neutral way, by the way. But I've learned a lot from you guys, and yeah, I think this is a model, right? Kind of organic conversation of, like, here's a topic and running with it. So, I've enjoyed it and I hope we can continue these conversations in the future.

David: Me, too. Thank you everyone. Have a great night.

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The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, a project of the Great Lakes Equity Center, is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance, resources, and professional learning opportunities related to equity, civil rights, and systemic school reform throughout the thirteen-state region.

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Finally, the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center would like to thank the Indiana University School of Education Indianapolis at IUPUI, as well as Executive Director Dr. Kathleen King Thorius, Director of Operations Dr. Seena Skelton, and Associate Director Dr. Tiffany Kyser, for their leadership and guidance in the development of all tools and resources to support the region.

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