

Royel Johnson:

So before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash and all indigenous nations, tribes and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

All right, I'll count you in. Three, two, one.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, Ash family and welcome back to another episode of the Ash Presidential Podcast focused on humanizing higher education. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, Associate professor of higher ed in social work at the University of Southern California and Director of Student Engagement at the USC Race and Equity Center. Shout out to my colleagues at the USC Race and Equity Center for being a co-sponsor of this. My co-host really needs no introduction, but allow me to introduce her anyway, the Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Good morning everyone. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore. I'm associate professor at Old Dominion University in higher education and community college programs. It is early in the morning and I am a human in higher education and so I am still waking up, but I am here and that's what's important. So we are excited to keep the conversations we've been having going around humanizing higher education. Today we're going to be having a very timely and important conversation where we're going to be talking about some of the conversations that's been going on around critical race theory, education and thinking about different perspectives of that from people who are navigating that on the ground in the K through 12 educational system. And from some scholars who are CRT scholars and educational scholars. We're really excited to have this conversation. And so I'm going to turn it back over to my co-host so he can talk about who's going to be joining us today.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, join us in welcoming our very, very, very, very special guests, Dr. Lori Patton Davis, who is professor and department chair at the Ohio State University, my alma mater. Shout to Ohio State. Ka'Dijah Brown, President of Berkeley Unified School District Board of Education. Dr. Camika Royal, Associate Professor of Urban Education at Loyola University, Maryland. Okay, so we start off every episode with this icebreaker. We call it this or that. We're going to give you two options. You just pick between one. Only one.

Felecia Commodore:

Just one.

Royel Johnson:

So Lori, as a fellow Bey-hiver, I know this one can be difficult for some folks, but I'm going to give you two things. Lemonade the album or Four the album by Beyonce?

Lori Patton Davis:

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Lemonade.

Royel Johnson:

Lemonade. All right, I see it.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay. Okay. All right. Ka'Dijah, I have a question for you. I know you are a girl from the bay and so the question is the Golden State Warriors or the San Francisco 49ers?

Ka'Dijah Brown:

Definitely the Warriors. The Warriors all day long.

Felecia Commodore:

All right.

Royel Johnson:

All right. Camika?

Camika Royal:

Yep.

Royel Johnson:

Max's or Dalessandro's?

Camika Royal:

Max's.

Royel Johnson:

Max's. I haven't had either actually.

Camika Royal:

We're [inaudible 00:03:37] all day.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. I'm a Max's girl. So this I'm down with this. Okay. So this question is for everyone.

Royel Johnson:

This one is going to shake some tables.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay. We're going to see what happens. Boyz II Men or New Edition?

Royel Johnson:

That's an intergenerational one.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

New Edition. [Crosstalk 00:03:55]

Camika Royal:

I feel like it's an unfair question. I think it depends on where you are, the trajectory of your life. So for the sake of my childhood first concert, I would have to say New Edition, but being the Philly jawn I am...

Royel Johnson:

Exactly.

Camika Royal:

I can't not ride for Boyz II Men.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. Rep for your people, Camika. I'm not mad at it.

Camika Royal:

I have to.

Royel Johnson:

So we're so glad that you all joined us for this conversation we think is so important. So as you know that over the past couple of years have been a number of really coordinated political attacks on critical race theory and other initiatives like the 1619 project that ultimately aimed to ban or restrict what is being taught in school classrooms and oncology university campuses. We've seen rallies organized, we've seen an executive order issued by a former president. We've seen legislation across a number of states that aim to do that. What is at the core of these attacks and what's really at stake for educational stakeholders is the essence of what we want to grapple with in this conversation. But before we jump into that, tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you've been engaged in and what humanizing education means to you.

Lori Patton Davis:

Hi everybody. I'm Lori Patton Davis. As was mentioned in the introduction, I am a professor of higher education and student affairs and chair for the Department of Educational Studies at the Ohio State University. Also former Ash president. A lot of how I conceptualize humanizing deals with one representation. How do we do research, teaching, service or whatever it is that we do that make people feel seen, that disrupts invisibility, a lot of that work focuses on black women and girls in educational and social context. Also looking at campus diversity initiatives. A lot of my work is looking at cultural centers, looking at LGBTQ populations, particularly at HBCUs, and then exploring how students develop in college. So that's the research agenda. But whether I am in the classroom or engaging in administrative work or service to the profession, what's at the core technically is around humanizing and providing opportunities and partnerships so that people feel seen, that they feel heard.

Lori Patton Davis:

And that doesn't mean we come into a space and everybody just agrees and we're just one big happy family. But it means that people were able to show up as their full selves and they were able to voice concerns, opinions, thoughts, ideas, and that those things were heard and validated. Now where human... or what I just said where that can be troubling I think is when there are opinions and perspectives brought to the table that expressly are oppressive in nature. So I will say that humanizing calls attention to the ways that when people come together, oppression can sometimes happen.

Lori Patton Davis:

And so I'm very conscious and thoughtful about that and that I am awesome at meeting people where they are and working across the aisle and all those things until I feel like you're trying to oppress me. And then that's a problem and that's where we got to figure out what's next. Do we need to [inaudible 00:07:55] in this conversation and walk away and agree to disagree? But in all of this, I don't feel a need to be violent with someone. I don't feel a need to try to harm somebody because they don't agree with my perspective. And so that's how I think about educational experiences that make people feel whole and recognize their wholeness. I'll stop there.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

Hello, my name is Ka'Dijah Brown. I feel incredibly honored to be here with you all today, so thank you for the invitation. As was shared earlier, I have the honor of serving as the president of the school board for Berkeley Unified School District in Berkeley, California. I am also a teacher and the coordinator of a black and African American student achievement initiative. So my whole work, my entire work is about humanizing people and about dismantling and demystifying myths and untruths that lead to dehumanizing people. My firm belief is that education levels the playing field, right? Education is what changes the lives of people, especially those who have a history of being underserved or underrepresented in education.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And so every day it is our job to demystify those things that we were talking about earlier, but also to create avenues for students as well as educators that are done in a way that is culturally responsive, that focuses on criticality and what is happening in education [inaudible 00:09:36] to ensure that we are both champions but also critics of what is happening in education right now. As well as ensuring that we have cultural responsive pedagogy that ignites student engagement and achievement throughout schools and preparing educators with the roadmap to be successful. And so that is my whole work and what I do and my mission and what drives me to ensure that we are continuing to serve all of our students well in Berkeley Unified School District, but specifically those who have history of being underserved.

Felecia Commodore:

Wonderful.

Camika Royal:

Good afternoon. I'm Camika Royal. I am, as was said in the introduction, associate professor of urban education at Loyola University Maryland, which is located in Baltimore. I am also on sabbatical for the...

Royel Johnson:

Shout out to sabbaticals.

Felecia Commodore:

No jealousy over here.

Camika Royal:

I'm enjoying [crosstalk 00:10:36]

Royel Johnson:

That's that glow we see. That's why you're glowing everyday.

Camika Royal:

I can say Loyola with a smile because I don't have to go back there until August, 2023. So I'm very excited. Part of humanizing myself. It's interesting this idea about humanizing education. I think about it more so in my work with students, but from a research perspective. So I just published my very first book, which I spent a very long time researching.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Enter the applause.

Camika Royal:

Thank you. Thank you. Black Educators And Public School Reform in Philadelphia. It looks at 50 years of school reform in Philly. I interrogated the board of education and school Reform commission minutes. Some meeting minutes I know are close to Dr. Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh I love it. I live for it. Live for it.

Camika Royal:

But also interviewed black educators and then corroborated the data with black newspaper accounts and other newspaper accounts and things. So part of my research, which is always about black educators or urban educators in particular in school reform and the politics of that reform, how those two entities meet, how one acts on the other, how they respond to one another, that sort of thing. It's always very important to me that I am trying to center the people who have been forced to the margins. And oftentimes that has been black educators, but I also have to be honest, sometimes it's black educators doing the marginalizing.

Royel Johnson:

For sure.

Camika Royal:

And so I have to be clear about that too. When I think about my work with students, I think about in the context of the pandemic in particular, or even pre-pandemic, I'm thinking about a white student. I'm a

black woman, y'all can see me, I'm a black lady from Philly in Baltimore and I had a white student from New York who used the N-word in her final presentation in my class and had it projected on my front board and everything. And since I'm the only N-word in the room, it felt weird, especially since this was from a student who did not want to talk about anything around race at the beginning of the semester.

Camika Royal:

And I'm like, well you got to love this. You didn't want to talk about it at the beginning of the semester, but now you projected the N-word on my board. And I think about her in this context because I remind myself that she is a young person and my job is to teach her. And so even though I'm like, I lowkey feel like you've got [in for me 00:13:27], I remove myself from that and say listen, this is a young person who wants to be a teacher. I would rather she make this error now with me where I can help to get her together than she go into Baltimore city.

Royel Johnson:

And [inaudible 00:13:42] are very different then.

Camika Royal:

And make that same comment where somebody may thump her, right? But in that context also, she invited her father down to the university to yell at me and tell me that I terrify his daughter. So this is the tension I feel constantly of trying to humanize this space for students who I'm trying to, even though many of them have been steeped in understanding beliefs and traditions that would take my life in a number of ways, my job is still to try to see their humanity and try to show them not only mine, because I give the grade, at some point they have to reconcile that, but also our most vulnerable. The young people who the children, they may one day teach or the parents who may not have the same insight or pull with my young people who become teachers.

Camika Royal:

So it's a constant challenge. It's a dance. It's one that I happily take on though, especially as COVID has happened and just trying to, even though people are like, oh, students are always trying to get over, maybe. But they're also human beings who, I had one this semester who lost both of his grandparents within two weeks of each other and just couldn't pull it together for the rest of the semester. And I feel like my task is to figure out how do I advocate for him at this institution so that we're not acting like that doesn't matter.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Royel Johnson:

I want to just amplify a point you said, the weight and responsibility of trying to see the humanity and students who refuse to see it in us and who are committed to the technologies of whiteness that seek to harm us, that's a weight as a black educator, as a black woman educator trying to train and prepare the next generation. The folks that go out and do this work, I just wanted to amplify that that sits with me. There's a lot of misinformation about critical race theory intentionally, right? Lori, what is critical race theory? What is it not for folks who are listening?

Lori Patton Davis:

Oh wow. I don't think I could ever articulate it as well as Kimberle Crenshaw, but I'll try. So to me, my use of critical race theory has been a lens or a framework for understanding the dynamics between race, racism, power and white supremacy. There are multiple lenses that help us to understand these things. Critical race theory is just one of them. And much of the earlier work around critical race theory stems from the legal field and has traversed into other academic areas, namely education. And so we use it as a framework to better understand educational policies. Not to call white people racist, but to understand the dynamics and the maneuvering of whiteness and white supremacy.

Lori Patton Davis:

So to be able to look at something that is seemingly race neutral and to identify the components of it that actually reveal how racial disparities happen or how as Kimberle Crenshaw says, how people fall through cracks. And so that's my sense making of critical race theory and one aspect of it is around challenging historicism. And I think that's where many detractors or folks who have issues with critical race theory have, I don't know, attempted to engage in erasing history or denying the truth about history and placing critical race theory there. But again, critical race theory isn't the only theory that encourages us or insists on historical accuracy around things that have occurred in the country. So that's a brief description of it.

Lori Patton Davis:

Of course it has tenants. I won't go into all of that. Anybody can get a book or an article and read about that. And I think that's the thing about it. Critical race theory isn't something that would necessarily show up in a K through 12 school, however, in teacher preparation programs where we are trying to help the overwhelming majority of future teachers who are white women understand the racial histories that have contributed to educational inequities, that have contributed to why some students go to one school versus another school, all of these pieces, they need to understand [crosstalk 00:18:53] to be around segregate housing, segregation and voting rights and all of these pieces that have an impact on education.

Lori Patton Davis:

And so in that regard, I'm still unclear about why there's a challenge with teaching. Well you know what, I'm not unclear, I'm being honest, but I think it's important I'll say for colleges and schools of education who are training teachers, if we're not calling in critical race theory, they at least need to understand how race and racism work, right? They need to understand how white supremacy is rooted in most things, in everything. But it's not just talking about concepts and giving definitions, but helping them to see what we have not been trained to see along the educational pipeline and to be able to see race and racism clearly and to be able to articulate the challenges around race and racism.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I think that's great and I'm so glad you brought up or highlighted that tenant of CRT of challenging the ahistoricism of things and the way we've been socialized within a white supremacist culture to understand things, often void of the reality of racism and how that is systematic and systemic and structural. And speaking of that, I wanted to ask you a question, Dr. Royal, you've mentioned your recently released book, *Not Paved For Us: Black Educators in Public School Reform of Philadelphia*, where you chronicle some of these histories and challenge some of the ahistoricism around the public school system, particularly in Philadelphia. And so wanted to ask you from your expertise and your

vantage point, how do the attacks on CRT align with other efforts historically to restrict or ban racial truth telling in schools and in scholarship?

Camika Royal:

I think that's a very interesting point. I'll start out by thanking Dr. Davis for using the word lens. That critical race theory is a lens. And the reason I appreciate that is because I'm wearing lenses...

Felecia Commodore:

They're very fly by the way.

Camika Royal:

Well thank you. I try to keep it together. But we all are wearing certain lenses and the question becomes what lens are people seeing our work and our students and even the discipline, the field itself through, right? CRT is just one of those lenses. So everybody else, you're still wearing a lens. The question is what is the lens? How are you viewing this sphere? What are you viewing it through? How this current moment aligns with previous moments I think it's a very interesting question. I'm thinking about... So I'm taking Philadelphia for example, the 1960s. There was a major protest on November 17th, 1967, 3500 black students from across the city who are now in their seventies, they're my mother's age. But they converged on the school district headquarters and said we want black teachers, we want black history classes, there's all these things that we want. And the pushback then was physical and violent.

Camika Royal:

So there were police released and they are beating students at the headquarters and everything to some extent. So if you take that as a beginning point, because that sort of thing was happening in a lot of places around the country. New York, you had Ocean Hill Brownsville, you had black educators saying, hold on, we are tired of people from outside our community controlling the education that happens inside our community. I think depending, on your location, because I often argue that context matters, and so how the conflict happens has a lot to do with the context, the local context in which and who the players are and the racial identities and the languages and who has power and the finances and all this sort of thing.

Camika Royal:

In some ways the things students in Philly were asking for in 1967, so for instance, this idea of having a black history curriculum that was adopted in Philadelphia, it became part of the formal curriculum, a graduation requirement that you have to take an African American history class to graduate was adopted in 2005. So it took from 1967 until 2005. But all along there, what's also happening is that in Office of African American studies was established in the school district and then it was subsumed in the Office of American History and Studies. So there's always this dance where we're having progress, but we're also moving back. I would say the attacks too. What becomes interesting is who's the face of the attack?

Camika Royal:

Because if we stick with this example of black history being something that was advocated for in 1967 in Philly and they never let up, it was a constant thing, the person responsible for subsuming, for crushing that office of African American studies actually came from the Bay. All right, God blessed her soul, but it

was Arlene Ackerman who had been superintendent in the schools in San Francisco and Washington DC and who was a black woman. Came in with an agenda that was created by the [inaudible 00:24:47] foundation. And so what happens is she doesn't know the local context, she doesn't understand, hey y'all just trying to combine offices and save money. What are you talking about?

Camika Royal:

And black people are like, you're going to combine offices and save money on our backs. This is something we've been fighting for, for this long and you just are going to come in and chop it down, right? So I think these attacks do line up with the attacks that have been constant. I don't know that they ever go away, I think that they just change shape, change form, they mail to whatever the time is. I'm also reminded in Philadelphia in 1988 there was a black superintendent of schools, a beloved [inaudible 00:25:35] of mine and people in Philly love her. She's very much an elder now in her eighties, Dr. Constance Clayton was a superintendent of schools for 11 years.

Camika Royal:

In 1988 there was some budget issues and she says, hey y'all, we have to be mindful of those who've been historically privileged. That was a direct quote. When she made cuts, she said, I'm going to protect the people who have not been historically privileged. And so then she starts getting death threats because she had the nerve to say, I want to make sure the people who have been the most marginalized and who have been the most harmed by cuts we've already done, that we're going to preserve them. And then the person who follows her up charges the legislature is racist. And then right as he [inaudible 26:24,] you can't really call the people racists and then be like, so write me a check. That's not how it works. So I do feel like this is just another moment and these folks feeling like they're losing ground in the battle to maintain the supremacy of whiteness in this country.

Felecia Commodore:

And I really like that you bring in the intertwined nature of trying to call out structural racism, systematic racism, systemic racism and economics. And particularly have the intertwined nature of those things can cause particularly when we think about the system like the P through 12 system, how it can cause some very tricky maneuvering for school leaders and school educational politicians and things of that nature.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, that's a perfect segue to the next question. Ka'Dijah, you are a school board president, so I know that these attacks and this current movement has impacted your particular work in a unique way. Can you talk a little bit more about what your life has been like as a president in this time?

Ka'Dijah Brown:

You it's definitely been a challenging time. Well, first of all, I think we have to call out just the challenging time that we are in because of the pandemic and when folks are in challenging times, when we are in financially challenging times, that oftentimes leads to other social problems as well. And so right now in education, we are definitely in the battle of the pandemic and trying to ensure that our schools remain open. The COVID cases in California are pretty challenging, but we are also in this social challenge as we think about critical race theory, as we think about the uprising that happened back in 2020 with the murdering of George Floyd. And here in Berkeley Unified School District, we decided that we weren't going to be stagnant or we weren't going to just put up a symbol or a sign that says, we stand for black lives. We decided to do something that has never been done before.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And we decided to create a Black Lives Matter resolution that did something that was unprecedented, which was gave almost \$1 million towards ensuring that our black and African-American students had better educational opportunities. And that although it is necessary, especially during this time, it is also a challenge to our community, especially with our community members who feed to this idea of white supremacy and anti-blackness who did not want to see that happen for our students. Well in that Black Lives Matter resolution, not only did it allocate the funds to educating our students well, what it also did is it pushed us to ensure that we have critical race theory at the forefront of our education and also in pushing our educators to have culturally responsive pedagogy.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And then what it did, this was very scary, but it needed it to happen, is it changed the names of schools that bear the names of enslavers. And we are the first school district in the nation to change the name of a school that had a United States president on it. So we changed the names of both Thomas Jefferson School and we were in the process of changing the name of the school that was formally called George Washington Elementary School here in Berkeley. Now doing all of those things are really great and it's exciting and it's necessary, but it also sparked an oppression Olympics in our community where we saw those who wanted to keep white supremacy in our community, mainly white families, but also folks who wanted to be white adjacent. We began to get those attacks from them as well.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And just to paint the picture for you, when we talk about Berkeley Unified School District, Berkeley Unified School District is the first school district to desegregate our schools without a court order. Berkeley Unified School District also has the first and one of the only black and African American studies departments as a K through 12 school district has at Berkeley High School that was created in 1968. So we are a city who is used to being progressive. We are a city who's been saying Black Lives Matter since the beginning of time. But because we are in a time that is so socially challenging, the uproar from our community has been like never before.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

So we've done these things before and we've created these avenues before, but we haven't experienced the backlash like this. And so I'm sure you wouldn't believe it unless you saw it, but the emails that I got, not just from people in Berkeley, but from around the nation telling us that we are crazy and that we are changing history for the worst [inaudible 00:32:00] that are the ones who are racist and creating racist avenues. It's been really mind blowing, especially because I thought we were in a place in our country where we were much further than this. So, that just speaks to what's currently happening in our school district. It also speaks to a little bit of the historical perspective of what we've been through and how, although 2022 is very different than 1968, some of the same challenges we are seeing today.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, that's really, really insightful. So thinking about what everyone has shared and in different perspectives and what's been going on, we want to think about what... I think sometimes people feel kind of helpless. What do we do with all of this? So we want to ask our guests what actions must be taken to ensure that racially and ethnically minoritized and marginalized students do have equitable opportunities for a humanizing educational experience?

Camika Royal:

I think that's a very interesting question. And honestly I feel like the way to do that is there are some people who will tell you policy changes. Okay. I am not going to tell you that because I feel like far too often it creates a lot of chatter and policy changes like the names of the buildings changing I think are important but also are often symbolic. And the policies still have to be implemented by people who may be operating under the framework [inaudible 00:33:48] to get around. And so from my perspective, honestly, I feel like how you create opportunities for minoritized students oftentimes is by being subversive and doing things that people don't necessarily know you doing. But...

Royel Johnson:

The meeting after the meeting.

Camika Royal:

[Inaudible 00:34:05] in whatever way you have to do it.

Lori Patton Davis:

I think being subversive is good. I agree with that. I also, rethinking the question, so yes, it is about racially minoritized students receiving an equitable education, but equitable to me means not only addressing students of color but also addressing white students. Because students of color are experiencing these things at the hands of white people, white teachers or white classmates whose parents are teaching them problematic ideologies at a young age. And so I vacillate back and forth with this idea around educating white people. When I was at Indiana University, I did the white racial literacy project and a lot of that pushback was, well why is white in it?

Lori Patton Davis:

And I'm like, well, because when we look at who's engaging in violence, when we look at who's creating these policies, when we look at all of these things, it's primarily white people. And that's not to say there aren't some people of color represented, but it's primarily white people. It's primarily white supremacist ideologies that are guiding many of the decisions and actions. And so to me, equitable is about addressing both sides. It is ensuring that we have practices, policies, opportunities for racially minoritized groups, but also how do we address the people who are engaging in the acts that are requiring us to think about equity, or requiring us to be more actionable about equity?

Lori Patton Davis:

And so again, we can address the students, we can try to bring equity as much as possible, but I don't know that it dismantles white supremacy. I don't know that it dismantles white supremacist ideologies. And so in terms of humanizing, I think it's really important if it's in a classroom environment where we're learning, I think it's important to teach children how to talk about race, right? That it's okay to say white, it's okay to say white supremacy. And when we say we're not attacking, it is about education, it is about the language we're using. And part of the issue and why I think it's such a hard... there's so much resistance is because people don't understand in academia we use certain language and those sorts of things. But I think there are ways of translating these more complex ideas that we talk about at a more localized level. Everybody don't get a PhD, have opportunities to do a master's degree and all that stuff. But how do we help people? How do we translate our research and scholarship so that it is one more accessible, that it's understandable?

Lori Patton Davis:

Yeah. And I think it have been you, Dr. Royal, somebody said something about things happening in cycles, right? This is the engagement that we'll be doing for the rest of our lives. If we're looking at this from a critical race perspective or being racial realists, then we know this doesn't go away. It morphs and becomes something else. But I am constantly thinking about the fact that it wasn't the Little Rock Nine who needed education. It was the random white kids chasing them, spitting, that's where the education needed to be situated. But it's hard to do that, unless you're being subversive. But it's not hard to do that when there's standards and all of these things [back 00:38:41] from Bennett.

Camika Royal:

The other sister wanted to respond. But I have a question for you then about some... I want to circle back to that.

Lori Patton Davis:

Oh, okay. So that's where I am. But the other piece about educating white students, white colleagues, that sort of thing, which it really did, it increased around the time of George Floyd's murder. But somehow white supremacy makes it labor that's placed upon...

Felecia Commodore:

The oppressed?

Lori Patton Davis:

[Crosstalk 00:39:16]. And so that's the space I'm in. I certainly want to do things that create equitable environments and equitable outcomes and that unapologetically address race and racism. But I'm also being very conscious of the fact around, again, another idea that within critical race theory, this idea around self preservation and how, as a black woman who, the lineage of black women has always been around labor. How do I preserve myself? And so I think people have to make choices that feel good to them in terms of how they're actionable. If you have the energy and the capacity to engage with white colleagues and teachers and students, no matter what you're doing, then by all means. But I'm also not committed to killing myself to [inaudible 00:29:25].

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. That's right. Yeah.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

I think for me it also, I agree with both what you said, Dr. Royal, and what you also offered Dr. Davis. And I think for me, just from an education perspective in K through 12, I think to answer your question Felecia, we have to first be honest about what is happening in our school districts before we can even talk about race and access to curriculum and access to content. We have to talk about the structures and symbols that many school districts have that uphold a legacy of racism, that uphold a legacy of oppression, that uphold a legacy of exclusion and inequality. And that is of course in our policies, but it's also in our protocols and it's also in our procedures and it's also in our practices. And these institutionalized injustices are not what students are reading from a textbook, it's what they're experiencing as soon as they step foot on a school campus. So it's the student that can't access

curriculum or content because they're suspended at disproportionate rates in comparison to their counterparts of other races.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

It's the student that is constantly sent to the hallway or to the office because their "behavior" does not fit the culture of power in their classroom or in their school campus. And I'm probably going to ruffle a couple of feathers with this next comment that I'm going to say. But it's these injustices that are really criminal and that have a direct impact on our student outcomes because we know that kids cannot learn unless they are in the seats. But we have this culture in our schools that push them out of the seats. So before we even can talk about race and we can talk about racism, we can talk about critical race theory or what has happened in the past that informs our decisions of today, we have to talk about the criminalization in our classrooms first that is happening especially to our black and African American students, specifically our black males. But these are the things that are true crimes. These are the injustices that really should be banned, and not critical race theory, but dismantling these barriers.

Felecia Commodore:

Dr. Royal, I know you had a burning...

Camika Royal:

Yeah, it's interesting because as I'm listening to you talk about the structures that perpetuate this harm, as someone who does try to humanize, and I'm listening to Dr. Patton Davis and I'm thinking about an incident I had with a white student who was a senior, he's a male student, but was taking a graduate class and it's foundations of education. And so I'm teaching about, this particular night, forms of racism. And we're on Zoom and in the chat and one of his classmates made a comment that he called racist and his white classmates start getting him together. And in some ways it's like, yes, this is what I want to have [inaudible 00:43:31] do it. But then he starts crying. He starts crying. And so, met with him after class because I'm like, I'm sorry you're upset. I'm sorry you're upset, but have a good evening. But the next day he says that he suggests I take this class session out of my future. So...

Felecia Commodore:

Oh.

Camika Royal:

Oh yes honey, that my definition of racism violates our university's policy and President Obama's definition of racism at [Google search 00:44:14].

Felecia Commodore:

How did Barack get into this?

Camika Royal:

Oh honey, I don't know. And anytime people want to talk about the liberals or the progressives, they bring out the synteresis to be like them. And so it became this really long thing. Now I'm like, okay, I love this. So I'm a scholar and he's telling me my definition violates this, that and the other. And I'm like, oh, okay. But the reason why I'm thinking about it now is because I refer it to the program director for the graduate students, and ultimately he says to them, I'm stressed out. I'm having a mental health issue

and so I can't come talk to nobody about this email I sent. And he did say he was having a mental health issue.

Camika Royal:

Now my sister who was assistant vice president of something, student success or something at Michigan State was like, now hold on. Because now I feel like they didn't have him come in and talk to anybody. And she was like, I think they're putting you at danger by not following up with this young person. I followed the process for the university but nothing was done with this. And my position isn't like, put him out, but I'm like, hey guys, this is a problem. This is weird. And so I don't want to write off students like him, But I also have, this is why I usually don't follow the university processes because they don't do anything, whereas I wasn't thinking this is someone who may actually end up trying to do something to cause me harm. My sister who was a university administrator in a different capacity was thinking, are you being safe?

Felecia Commodore:

Are you safe? Yeah.

Camika Royal:

[Inaudible 00:45:58] your safety in this regard. So it's just something I wrestle with.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I think that's really interesting to think about as black educators, that in certain spaces and places, what we do is dangerous.

Royel Johnson:

It is.

Felecia Commodore:

Right? It's dangerous for us. And we are in systems who ultimately don't value our bodies. And so we have to think about how do we protect ourselves when the system won't protect us.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

When the system won't protect us, and when white fragility is being used as a weapon [crosstalk 00:46:42]. Because Dr. Royal, that's really what it was, right? White fragility was used to weaponize what you were teaching and putting you at danger and at risk. And that happened so many times. Even at, I'm always going back to K through 12 education, but I can tell you the times where I was a student or I've seen plenty of students and they talk about their experience in the classroom, they talk about the inability to have access to the content.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And what happens is the teacher who is supposed to be the truth teller in that situation because they have not done their job or because they didn't provide access to the student, then it becomes the water works, which then changes the narrative. And then we focus on the student's behavior and why all of these other aspects that are not important to the main point at hand and in education, we are

constantly being put in a place where we have to continue to be truth pillars but also call out those moments of white fragility that are incredibly dangerous.

Royel Johnson:

But as Dr. Davis alluded to earlier, we have to put our mask on first and make decisions about which moments do we intervene. Felecia knows this, I had a situation with a student who harassed me and another black colleague in my last institution and the school, university refused to see it as a race issue that it was ideological. You have these liberal radical professors who are teaching these ideologically latent issues and conservative student. We met with everyone from the behavioral threat management team to affirmative action, chief diversity officer, dean, Provost, et cetera, and they refused to see our humanity as educators who weren't even teaching diversity classes, teaching just core classes.

Royel Johnson:

And it is dangerous. And we have to make decisions about how do we preserve ourselves in the consequences of it for our physical health, our spiritual health, our emotional health and so forth. So one of the things that we were excited about is the range of professional orientations and positions that you all have. And we were thinking about what does it mean to effectively partner and work with folks who are on the ground, in school districts leading, and how do we leverage our scholarship in ways that support and give you all what you need to fight against the attacks that are happening right now?

Camika Royal:

I'll start because I probably have this very new weirdness. So there's a June 16th, that was the first day for the new superintendent of schools in Philadelphia. And on Monday he announced his transition team. And so I am one of the leaders.

Felecia Commodore:

Ooh, we love it. Wow. Maybe we don't, I don't know.

Camika Royal:

But I'm still talking about Philly, right? And I feel very, because there was a lot of chatter in the news about who's doing what and my line sister was like, well just prepare for people to drag you when your name is announced. I was like, drag what? Drag who?

Felecia Commodore:

That's the Philly I know. I was going to say you a real Philly doctor. That's the Philly I know.

Camika Royal:

I'm up here to do some work. I graduated high school in my district, I did all this research, but don't come over here talking stupid. I ain't got problems with nobody. But if you start them, I may have to finish it.

Felecia Commodore:

Cardi B said, who going do what to who? [Singing 00:50:19]

Camika Royal:

But the thing for me, when I first saw the list of who the people would be on the different committees, it actually incensed me to a degree, because you know you have people who don't know the city who are placing people and they're talking to who may not have context. And so I'm sitting there like, well this is an interesting name. This person in the nineties, he was a young person on the school board and he actually as a Latinx person partner switched his allegiance from the black members of the board to the white members of the board seeing who would put him on the board.

Camika Royal:

And then in 2013, when he was the president of the state appointed, state taken over school district, the school reform commission, he helped to close 30 schools and to bust the union contract. You took away nurses and three children died. So how many schools do you have to close for somebody to say, actually we don't want your opinion in this process, but y'all got him on this list. Right? Or me saying, why are there two charter people when my one committee and I don't have anybody from comprehensive neighborhood schools represented on this committee.

Camika Royal:

That's how I see myself partnering with people in the district by, and they're like, oh, well we're waiting on somebody from the district headquarters to populate the list. And I'm like, sweetie, this is my home. Let me get on the phone. I'm going to call a couple of people. We have this anti-racist district culture committee. I need folks from the Philly Student Union, like [inaudible 00:52:10] these folks to come down here and participate in this. That's how I see my role and my contribution. Now ultimately, I don't know what will come of it, but I'm in it and I'm doing my best to center the people who often get shut out of the conversations and of the work.

Lori Patton Davis:

I think in my role it's a little different being a department chair. So as y'all know, I have to follow university policy and everything, right? And I do that of course, but I'm also thinking about what other ways I can interpret that policy so that it does lead to equitable outcomes. But one of the things I think is really cool about the college and our relationships with local schools is what our dean, Dean Don Pope-Davis has done. And so we have this thing called superintendents and residents. And so these superintendents collaborate with my department, with our department of teaching and learning to do programs, to do professional development, to do grants.

Lori Patton Davis:

And so I've seen some really great things happening, but for me, what I am often thinking about from a department chair standpoint is what's going on with the education? How are we preparing graduate students? How are we preparing future school leaders, principals, superintendents? And so my emphasis work wise is often around, well what are the aspects of the curriculum that address this? Who is in the classroom offering their perspective? Who are we hiring? All of those pieces. Because I think it shapes decisions that people make in terms of the curriculum style and if the work is going to be learner centered. But from my own personal standpoint, I am very open and it's hard to respond to this question now because I'm so new here, but trying to do things that engage the larger communities.

Lori Patton Davis:

So I, not as a department chair, but as Lori, when [Vakya 00:54:39] Bryant was killed, trying to create some sort of space because there wasn't one to just process and talk about what happened, right? And

so I reached out to the superintendent of Columbus City schools and she was like, okay. And so she brought her whole team onto a Zoom call and we ended up having this event that really I think opened people's minds around what happened because what we had going was a lot of rhetoric around what she did this and it was always the victim. Why was this happening and what was she doing there? And so I try as best I can to plan things that bring people together that offer some clarity to disrupt some of the common ways that we think about children, how we think about education. And I'm hoping to do more in the future.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

Now I'm all deep into everything that Dr. Davis and Dr. Royal are saying but I'm going to ask you to repeat the question again.

Felecia Commodore:

That's okay.

Royel Johnson:

Well one way to reframe the question is how can education researchers and scholars support what you're doing on the ground and help counter what you're experiencing in the attacks from the public?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

I think Dr. Davis probably hit the nail right on the head with her comment earlier about our responsibility really to educate and empower those who are in front of our young people. And so oftentimes I think back to my teacher preparation program and how I got my first D on a paper because we were tasked with watching a lesson that a teacher was giving and we were supposed to write a response about it and what we noticed and the teaching practices that we were learning in our teacher preparation program, were supposed to call those out as we saw them in the lesson.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

Well, I took it upon my very opinionated self to of course do what the task asked me to do, but to push it a little further and call out how there was no cultural responsive teaching in the classroom, how the teacher ignored the black students in the classroom, how there was no focus on giving access to everyone in the classroom to have the codes of power that were happening there. In my lesson reflection, I also called out how in the class I also did not receive any training about how to educate my Latinx students, my ELD students, absolutely, but not my Latinx students, not my black and African American scholars, not my AAPI scholars. So of course all of those opinionated things led me to get a very bad grade on my paper.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

However, it taught me something. And of course I went through the entire process to rebuttal the decision, you know how that goes. You all are educators, so I'm sure you've had students do that same thing. But what it taught me is that our preparation programs, the content that we were looking at was set up to support one idea, and that idea is that white is right. And so as an educator, I knew it was

wrong, but how many other educators do not have that truth telling background that do not have access to the same ideas in the same way that I was brought up in my same thinking? How many teachers are not metacognitive?

Ka'Dijah Brown:

They're not thinking about what they are thinking or thinking about what they are being taught or thinking about what they are saying. And led me to believe that we have to be very intentional about who we are putting in front of our students, but also about what we are feeling, and what we are teaching them, what we are educating them, what we are giving them access to. And so for researchers, that's my call on you, that's my plug to you. Please, when you are doing your research, when you are creating content, when curriculum is being created, let's do it in a way that changes the narrative, that shifts the narrative, that puts those who are always on the back burner, meaning black and African American students, our sped learners, our Latinx learners that pushes them forward, puts them at the center of the work, at the center of the curriculum, center of the content so that we can ensure that we change our society.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

It's so interesting to me that we've been singing the same songs of revolution, we've been singing the same songs of civil rights for decades and decades, but still having the same experience. I think that for me is what I need to be able to do the work that we are here doing with our boots on the ground here in education. It definitely is our responsibility to ensure that we have policies that are reflective in the needs of our community. But our schools are only as good as the teachers that we are able to fill them with. So we have to prepare and empower teachers in a better way. So I'm calling on y'all to help me do that.

Felecia Commodore:

No, that's great. And I think ultimately what I'm hearing, Ray, is that it takes all of us working together and communicating and strategically working as a network to dismantle these systems that are creating these inequities and harming, ultimately our students in our communities. And I think often, particularly I know in higher education when we talk about networking, it's only to benefit ourselves. But we don't necessarily talk about creating networks as strategic advances to dismantle things and to deconstruct [crosstalk 01:00:54]. And I was really excited about this conversation because I also think we don't talk enough about that connection between what's happening in higher education and what's happening in P through 12 and we're all fighting together and we should be fighting together and [crosstalk 01:01:12] together.

Royel Johnson:

So as we wrap up, we have a question that we ask all of our guests and that is, how are you finding and or creating joy these days? Or are you? Well, someone's on sabbatical, so that sounds very joyous.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

Sounds joyous to me. I'm finding joy on you being on sabbatical. So.

Camika Royal:

In the early days of COVID in September of 2020, I was very blessed to be able to buy my first home.

Royel Johnson:

Congratulations. That's amazing.

Camika Royal:

Thank you. And my house honestly brings me joy because I never knew, because I never owned a home. I never really cared about, I grew up in a house that my parents worked hard for. It just wasn't part of my thing until COVID hit and I had to stay in my little one bedroom apartment and I was like, the devil is a liar. This is too small. But being here has given me joy because I plot on little things that I want like, you know what? I think this room needs some wallpaper. Let me go on a search for... Just being able to be creative in that way brings me just endless joy. Y'all can't even imagine how much time I spend looking at swatches, that I never would've thought about. So it's what does it for me right now.

Royel Johnson:

Nice.

Lori Patton Davis:

I've done it with travel, taking time out when I do travel to disconnect my email from my phone. I find that in this administrative role, I'm always looking at my, anytime I hear the email, I hear the chime. Instead of just turning the notification off, I take it off the phone so that it helps me to be more present in the moment and that has been significant. Accepting the fact that no is a full sentence has been really powerful for me. And so I've said no to a lot. I still say yes to things, but I've said no to a lot and have gotten past this idea of disappointing.

Lori Patton Davis:

When people ask you to do something and they're coming to you specifically because they like what you do or something like that, and you want to engage but realize you're at capacity, just saying no a lot has been really joyful for me. And of course just spending time with family and reading and I'm good for binge watching something. My other love is film. And so being able to escape and go into a different world or a different space is what really helps me to just escape and focus on things that I like and find my own little space of joy.

Felecia Commodore:

Wonderful.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

First I want to appreciate the question. I think that we don't spend enough time thinking about or talking about joy and what brings us joy, especially in this work. Right now preparing some work around Gholdy Muhammad's framework around Cultivating Genius. And so she says that there are five pursuits around identity; skill, development, intellectualism, criticality, and then the final one is joy. And that you cannot do anything in the classroom without having joy. So I appreciate that question around joy. And so what brings me joy is knowing that I am my ancestors' wildest dreams. I am what my ancestors prayed for, what they prepared for, what they fought for, what they sacrificed for, what they died for brings me joy.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

And being able to live in that brings me joy. Being able to do things like traveling around the world brings me joy and especially in knowing that that was accessible to my ancestors always. Being the youngest person ever elected as a president of the school board, that brings me joy knowing that wasn't always an opportunity, especially when there were legal rights that prevented us from being able to vote. So those are the things that bring me joy in sitting in that gratitude and appreciation of where my life is brings me a lot of joy. Now I'm going to have to take a page out of Dr. Davis's book and learn how to say no since obviously [crosstalk 01:06:02] in my life.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm in the same boat, so I'm going to try to model after Dr. Davis because I have [inaudible 01:06:12].

Ka'Dijah Brown:

[Inaudible 01:06:12] that no is a full and complete sentence.

Royel Johnson:

Listen, do we need to try to come up with extra language? We don't need that. Just no. Period.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

[Inaudible 01:06:1] let me see. And I need to turn [inaudible 01:06:21].

Royel Johnson:

I said what I said.

Ka'Dijah Brown:

But those are the things that bring me joy. And finally, knowing that the situations that we are in and the challenges that are plaguing public education are not going to last forever. And that we are the ones who have been called to action and we are the ones who are able to change the narrative, no matter how stressful it is, brings me a lot of joy.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, thank you. This has...

Royel Johnson:

This is bringing me joy.

Felecia Commodore:

...brought me a lot of joy. Yes. We've been excited about this conversation since it was scheduled and it's been everything we could imagine it to be. And you are all three phenomenal black women. Brilliant black women. So we are excited to get to be in conversation with you, in community with you and support you in all the work that you're doing, all the good, hard dismantling work that you're doing. And so we are glad this is part of our ongoing conversation about humanizing higher education and thinking about what that looks like. And so me and Royel are excited to keep the conversation going. Thank you all for coming. Thank you all for listening and we'll see you soon.

This transcript was exported on Oct 11, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Royel Johnson:

See you soon.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you to our guests, Dr. Lori Patton Davis, Ka'Dijah Brown, and Dr. Camika Royal for joining us today and getting us information regarding how scholars, practitioners, educators and policy makers can work together to debunk misinformed myths and dismantle an equitable education system. At the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack as we reflect on what musical selections ring in our minds as we think about the day's conversation. Today, the song that came to mind was The Revolution Will Not Be Televised by Gil Scott-Heron, because we've got work to do in order to manifest and humanizing educational experience for our communities, and it will be live in color and take all of us working together to make it happen.

Felecia Commodore:

[Singing 01:08:54].

Felecia Commodore:

Well, that is today's song for our Scholar Soundtrack, and you'll be able to find a playlist of these songs along with the syllabus for today's episode and all of the episodes in the Ash Presidential podcast series. We're still rolling on.

Royel Johnson:

Get ready for another exciting conversation about humanizing higher education next week. I promise you will not want to miss it. Until then, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel Johnson:

Until next time, keep it human.