Vidya Shah (00:00:06):

Hello, and welcome to season two of the UnLeading podcast series. We are ready to dive into all things leadership, to get messy, to try to make sense of who we are as leaders. And to try to imagine who we want to be.

Vidya Shah (00:00:28):

UnLeading invites us to dig below the surface of leadership practices and frameworks to interrogate our assumptions about leading, schooling and community. We lean into learning that disrupts the status quo and refocuses our attention on frameworks for leadership that open up transformative possibilities for equity, inclusion, community, and liberation and education and society. I am so thrilled to introduce this topic and the amazing folks we have joining us in conversation today who span community, the academy and schools. And if you want to know more about our panelists, you can find their full bios and contact information on the unleading website: https://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading/. Today we're talking about leading towards disability justice. And in this podcast, we consider what it means to center disability justice in our thinking, in our practices, in our relations and in our institutions. And we intentionally use the word towards in our title because we wanna honor the fact that this concept and practice of disability justice has come from community and in educational spaces, the practice and understanding of disability justice is still very much an aspirational goal, but one that needs to be attended to with care and intention. Nonetheless, reflecting on the past few years, we explore in this podcast, have the COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for disabled folks and highlight the urgent need for disability justice. Our conversations will engage us in reflexive inquiry, as we consider who we need to be as leaders leading towards disability justice and how we apply our understanding of disability to the work we do in communities in schools and the academies. Finally, we share in imagining what schools and communities might look like if they were designed around principles of disability and transformative justice. As I think about my own struggles with depression, the spectrum of disability, I experience in my body and mind and the ways that I have developed a false sense of pride, security and comfort based on ableist logics. When I think about all of that, it makes me really excited to dive into this conversation that really is at the heart of education and society. And as we have with all of our podcasts, our opening speaker is the amazing Dr. Gillian Parekh professor, Canada research, chair, and disability studies and education, and just beautiful human being welcome, Gillian,

Gillian Parekh (00:03:14):

Thank you, Vidia. Thanks so much.

Vidya Shah (00:03:17):

So Gillian, turn it over to you and we I'd love to hear if if you can help us frame today's discussion.

Gillian Parekh (00:03:23):

Great. Thank you. And thanks so much again for, including me in this really important podcast. So, you know, talking about disability in education is always interesting to me because there are so many different ways that disability is approached in schools. When it comes to schools and the practice of schooling. I don't think education has really come to terms with how schooling itself not only contributes to a construction of disability, but also in many ways, perpetuates ableism, you know, at the core of schooling is the drive to develop, to grow, to gain new skills and abilities. All of which are very important. However, there doesn't seem to be an acknowledgement that spaces in which ability is so overtly celebrated what that might mean for disabled students. I also think that disability is excluded from

discussions on social justice or equity focused initiatives in schools, because there's a popular belief that schools already do so much for disabled students.

Gillian Parekh (00:04:23):

After all, we have an entire system dedicated to supporting disabled students, the special education system, access to services, accommodations technology can hugely influence students, academic and social engagement in school. But the tricky part is, is that in order to access many of these services and supports students and their families have to navigate a system that often positions students through a deficit lens, and that recurring message can be really harmful. I think this message not only affects students' social experiences in schools, but when we work with students, they report how this deficit a notion also frames the services and supports they access. You know, in our research, we hear from students all the time who are refusing to use assistive technology or don't wanna access resource support because of fears of stigma and subsequent discrimination in their schools. So I arrived to this work as a disability study scholar.

Gillian Parekh (00:05:20):

I grew up with disability being a significant part of my own and my family's experience. I've worked in special education as a teacher, and then before moving to York as a district researcher where I primarily studied special education and streaming from a system level and critical disability studies in some ways share similar approaches to disability as critical race, critical gender or fat studies scholars who would examine notions of race, gender, and the body, you know, particularly in how they are constructed in contrast to dominant norms and ideals. And part of the work is investigating how these norms are informed and used uphold the ideologies of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and capitalism. In disability studies and education there is this ongoing tension around how ability and disability are pathologized in the context of schooling. And what I love about disability studies and education is how it challenges these pathologized discourse, not always attributed to disability. I might add that operate in schools and instead draws attention to the larger social economic, political, and environmental forces that can both construct and produce disability. And so what's exciting about this work is centering the experience of disability and promoting opportunities for students to consider what disability identity means and what could be possible in schools if we adopted notions of disability pride. So in this work, we're really asked to consider some of the bigger questions around the role ability and disability play in how we organize our schools and how schools respond to our students. Now, there are a lot of theorists who talk about the reproductive nature of schooling and how exclusions experienced in one sphere of students' lives can be replicated in others. And we know from the research that students with disabilities are less likely to access post-secondary education are less likely to access employment, particularly equitably paid employment are more likely to encounter barriers to independent housing and healthcare. And we know that disabled people are disproportionately vulnerable to multiple forms of incarceration as scholars who investigate the implications of schooling on the trajectories and futures of disabled students, we really need to be asking schools to consider and address how their policies and practices may be contributing and reproducing these hierarchies that end up impacting students' futures, you know, well beyond graduation. So I'm guessing that most people have probably heard about the social model of disability, you know, which challenges us to consider how disability is not just an individual issue or only located within the individual, but is produced in relation to the social, environmental and attitudinal barriers that people encounter. There's been a lot of work on advancing international principles and legislation on disability rights, attempting to put some kind of teeth to elements outlined in the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, but within the disability rights movement, many communities continue to be excluded, you know, after all it's largely

communities that already have access and power that can successfully pursue human rights claims and fight within the courts similar to special education, you know, in our research students and families that are privileged through special education are more likely to be white and wealthy.

Gillian Parekh (00:08:42):

So from these tensions and inequity, even from within the disability rights movement, disability, justice was born and has since offered essential principles for action recognition and solidarity as a concept and a movement disability justice was developed out of community primarily by disabled people of color, many of whom produce art, advocacy and community Sins invalid is a foundational disability justice organization within the disability justice movement. I hope we can add a link to their site so folks can check it out if that's possible adopting Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, disability justice challenges the idea that disability is an isolated experience, as well as challenges the systems through which we have to navigate as being unresponsive and non reflexive. So Patty Berne, one of the founders of Sins Invalid said in an interview, and I quote, you can't do a project on disability without having that project be situated in the context of race and gender. For example, because disability identity is not independent of any other identity. So sins invalid has actually produced a list of principles of disability justice, which I hope we can also <laugh> post to the website. But from the list of 10 principles, I've picked just five to touch on in the context of schools. So the first principal is a principal of intersectionality. So recognizing how ableism and racism collude to shape how schools respond to disability. And that's so important when examining equity and education, it is not by accident, but is a result of this collusion that even when achievement is controlled for black students are more likely to be perceived as less capable learners and funneled through programs that result in a fewer opportunities for post-secondary education and employment. Conversely, the same collusion privileges, white wealthy students who are more likely to be streamed to specialized in elite programs that offer an array of post-secondary options of networks.

Gillian Parekh (00:10:46):

The second and third principles are the principles of cross movement and cross disability solidarity. You know, if these were to be adopted in schools, it would result in recognizing and addressing disability discrimination with a unified commitment to dismantling racist and colonial practices in Ontario special education system. Students are often identify with particular exceptionalities. And as a result, there are times when these groups are unfairly pitted against one another, and the differential power that families wield behind these categories can also be hugely inequitable. If schools adopted cross disability solidarity, there would be a far greater recognition of disability discrimination as a whole, and as systemic in schools, the principal of recognizing wholeness like imagine education is so often accused of having sold its aspirational goals of producing critical thinking, civically engaged you knowstudents by adapting capitalist principles of producing productive, economically independent workers, disability theorists have forever been talking about how the hyper focus on education and the goal of creating highly skilled, productive workers has itself resulted in producing disability and ultimately attaching social value to those who can contribute to the labor force will devaluing those who are excluded.

Gillian Parekh (00:12:11):

Imagine if we instead saw the value of students outside of these capitalist frames and valued their wholeness, their histories and life experiences. And lastly, and I think I'm probably running out of time. But the principal most critical to this podcast is the principal of leadership of those most impacted, you know, thinking about schools. I wonder when the last time you know, the education policy writers or experts spoke to disabled students and asked, so was this working for you? You know, when was the last

time the special education department in your school district was headed by someone with direct experience of of special education as a student. So to kind of wrap this up, I, I always wanna say that we're emerging from this COVID pandemic but I just don't know what that looks like or whether that is to be, but, you know, throughout disabled people have disproportionately born the brunt of ableist health policies. There seems to be, you know, a little public outcry at the ways in which COVID tore through long-term care facilities or the ongoing rhetoric of, you know, it's okay. Only people with underlying conditions are really at risk or have to mask indefinitely or have to stay home and shelter while the rest of the world moves on. But what has come to the fore throughout this horrific era of COVID is that we need more disabled leaders and leaders who have direct knowledge of our institutions and the implications of policy decisions on disability. And I would love to see a turn in our leadership practices in schools where the lived experience of disability and institutional knowledge as systems users were truly valued.

Vidya Shah (00:13:46):

Ah, Gillian, thank you. That was such a beautiful opening. Thank you for really setting the tone and helping us think through context here in Ontario, but also internationally, and to think about what needs to change as we lead towards disability justice. And we will definitely be linking the website of Sins Invalid and also the principles of disability justice on our website. So folks, please look out for that. Ooh, the fire has started so exciting. We are going to continue this amazing discussion and I'm thrilled to introduce our panel first. I'd like to introduce Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, a professor of sociocultural studies and education at the university of Alabama. Welcome Nimala.

Nirmala Erevelles (00:14:29):

Hello, and thank you for inviting me here. So happy that you're here with us.

Vidya Shah (00:14:34):

I'd also like to welcome Yasmine Gray and Yasmine is a master student in critical disability studies at York university living and working in Toronto, Ontario. Welcome Yasmine.

Yasmine Gray (00:14:46):

Hi, happy to be here. Thank you.

Vidya Shah (00:14:49):

So happy you're here Yasmine and I'd like to introduce as well: Jeff Hall and Jeff is the vice principal with the PO district school board and PhD student at the Ontario Institute for studies in Education at the university of Toronto. Welcome Jeff.

Jeff Hall (00:15:05):

Thanks Vidya. So glad to be here

Vidya Shah (00:15:07):

So glad, so glad for us all to be here. You know, one of the, the first questions that I'd, I'd love to sort of just, just ask people to think about is, you know, if you can tell us a little bit about who you are and how you come into this space. And so Nirmala, I'd love to start with you.

Speaker 3 (00:15:24):

Okay. Hello, I'm Nirmala and thank you for inviting me to speak at this forum. I'm actually the nerd person in this group because I'm a professor in the, in social cultural studies in education. And I came to disability studies from an academic perspective, but that's the thing about disability. That disability is not an identity that just you can arrive at you become. So now I think I belong in very complicated ways, both me and my family within the disability community. And I have learned a lot from disability activists about the more radical arguments, really the arguments about disability justice, that the academy is never able to adequately engage with. And so a lot of what I would talk about today is saying, is actually marking that I'm learning it from a broader community. I'm also a parent and watching what schools have done both to my own daughter who is not disabled, but who could also find herself in these categories of difference in complicated ways, as well as watching what schools do to other students, particularly students of color have made me an advocate for students with disabilities, because I really try really hard to kind of get the school system to unlearn the systems of ableism that they so casually put into place on a daily basis.

Vidya Shah (00:16:54):

Thank you, Nirmala. Thank you so much for that Yasmine. We'd love to hear from you.

Yasmine Gray (00:17:00):

So, as we said earlier, I am a disability studies student at York university. I also completed my minor in disability studies at X university now known as Toronto Metropolitan. I don't love that name, but I came to disability studies while I was in my undergrad. And the more that I learned about critical disability studies and disability justice, the more it helped me to actually understand my own experiences of disability and understand how ableism and racism had been impacting my life and the lives of people around me and the lives of the children that I was working with in schools. So it really just helped open my mind in that way. I've had different roles in schools. So I've worked as a violence prevention educator, and I've worked as an afterschool program coordinator. And when I was working in those roles, I, wasn't always working with children who explicitly identified as disabled, but were actually moving through the world and moving through the education system while experiencing extreme levels of violence as a result of anti-black racism and ableism and how those two things intertwine and overlap onto each other. I really was working with children who were quote unquote the like in the school were seen as the bad children. We didn't see them that way, but those were the children that I was working with, children who were at risk of suspension, children who were already facing exclusion within their school and within even the larger environment and being able to work alongside them and get to know them and also witness firsthand how educators treated them. Again. These are all things that just deepened my understanding of disability justice, and also deepened my commitment to kind of inform more people about this, because imagine how, how much different young people could be moving around and going through education, if they had the language to describe what they're experiencing. So that's how I kind of enter into the space.

Vidya Shah (00:18:55):

Beautiful. Thank you so much. Yamine, Jeff, welcome.

Jeff Hall (00:18:59):

Yeah, thanks. I, I come to disability justice rather late in life, even though I sort of have lived this life experiencing disability in a variety of contexts, specifically in a variety of, of educational contexts and

being a disabled student being a hate disabled teacher and then, and then a disabled administrator. Those, those contacts have definitely just sort of shaped my experiences and my sort of outlook of disability and also recognizing how my own historical internal ableism has been shaped as well. And I think disability justice really helps me sort of see that as well. I think being a disabled administrator in a school gives me a unique perspective and especially some as someone who looks at disability through, through a critical lens. I think that gives me a sort of a unique perspective to that. Maybe not a lot of other administrators necessarily see yet. I say yet because I'm trying to be optimistic. But I think that's that kind of sums up how I come into this space.

Vidya Shah (00:20:22):

So thank you all so much. You know, I think one of the things that is really interesting for us to think about is what is it that movements towards disability justice and we're intentionally using this language of towards, because you know, we wanna honor where, where this movement has come from. It is aspirational in many ways that we are sort of moving towards this, especially given where we are in education right now. But you know, I'd love to hear about, as we think about disability justice, what are the kinds of normative ideas of both schooling and leadership that this approach challenges? And what would you say are some of the challenges that you face in trying to lead from this vantage point? So maybe we'll start with, with Yasmine here.

Yasmine Gray (00:21:13):

So responding to the first half of the question, how does disability justice kind of disrupt normative ideas of schooling, disability, justice actually makes us think about what is normal like normal is a taken for granted construct to understand that that's a social construct to understand that normal doesn't actually exist like that. These ideas of normal, what is normal, who is normal, are all based in white supremacy. They make whiteness the standard, they make the white cisgender non-disabled body, the norm, and then anyone who's far, apart from that, anyone who's different from that gets labeled and gets separated out and gets excluded in a subject to, to different forms of, of violence and disability. Justice actually looks at like systems of oppression. Like for example, looks at capitalism as an example of why the need to even uphold such a logic, seeing that it doesn't serve the majority of us. I look at the school system where I'm based in, in Toronto, it doesn't serve the majority of the Toronto school board students, majority of whom are non-white. But why maintain that ideology? Because there's there's benefit to it. It does benefit the small few who then are able to maintain their power and maintain their position by keeping power out of the hands of those who have been labeled as different. Those who have been labeled as less than. Within the school system, this, this is the ideology of normal. You can see it in so many different ways that again are taken for granted and are just taken as the norm. It's simple things like standardized testing or special education classes, which justify the exclusion of certain students over others. It's coming in the form of academic streaming. And again, they stream students in this way because they need a working class, right? <Laugh> they need a working class. So any individuals who can be marked as different marked as less than their exclusion is then justified as a result. And it does create this binary of who deserves to feel safe in school and who doesn't, who deserves to feel valued at school and who doesn't who's worthy and who's not, who's protected and who's not. Within schools that ideology is ever present. And it's felt by students who are at the margins of multiple identities that then get pathologized within the school setting. And this can come in overt ways and covert ways. And it's something that disabled students of color learn to navigate, even when they don't have the words for it. They're experiencing it from the day that they enter the school system system from the very first day K all the way to eight high school post-secondary it just continues.

Speaker 4 (00:24:06):

I think that a major challenge for bringing disability justice into schools is just, again, how normalized all of what I described is all of what I described are things that educators and helping professionals all see as helping. We're helping we're doing our job! This is what we're supposed to do. What else are we supposed to do? What else are we supposed to do? And I think it's just important to, to have conversations like these, where this information can be disseminated and people can start to understand and start to really think critically about where all these notions come from, because it's all rooted in history. What is normal? What, what is productive? What is a successful student? All these things are not just neutral. You know, they're not, they're not neutral. They come out of what this society values and the society really values again, as I said earlier, like whiteness <laugh>, you know, and whoever's as close to that as possible.

Yasmine Gray (00:25:08):

That's what they're going to continue to promote and reward. And again, the entire education system is based on all these ideas. So obviously that makes it even more challenging to disrupt because even if individual educators have this awareness, then they're up against a whole system. In my own experience in schools, I found that it helped me anyway to just build relationships. You know, people know me, people see me, I'm welcoming, you can hear it in my voice. And so then when I come in with my radical ideas <laugh>, and they see me working with students in a particular way, that may be different than what they themselves would've done. They start to go, ah, what's that over there, you know? And you know, you just kind of very slowly let them see for themselves the difference, you know, because sometimes within the school setting, I'm approached by educators who are saying like, you know, so and so that's student don't even bother with them. Don't even try, it's not gonna work. And, you know, I don't necessarily make a comment. I just continue my work with that student. And in two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, that same educator will come to me. And oh, this student has been so much calmer in class. This student really looks forward to your program, this, that, and the other. And I'm like, I mean, I know <laugh>, I know <laugh>, but you know, that's, that's actually an opportunity to really critically engage with that educator and hopefully shift their thinking a little bit. You know, it's not a miracle, I'm not a miracle worker here. It's just about engaging with students in a different way, perhaps not just racing to punishment all the time, you know and listening to students and asking them what they want. I think also another challenge in education is sometimes people overcomplicate something that they don't understand. So if they don't understand disability justice, they think that it's gonna be expensive and they're gonna get more training and they don't have the time and they don't have the resources. And I understand all of these are concerns, but disability justice can really look as simple as just asking a child what they want instead of deciding for them. You know, it can look as simple as creating a classroom in a really intentional way to try to accommodate your students without your students, necessarily having to demonstrate paperwork or invasive like medical tests and assessments to prove why they need the accommodation. Because we know that it's not that those types of forms and those types of assessments, aren't always equally available to everyone. And we also know how those forms and assessments can harm certain people particularly like black disabled students who then that very same documentation as you suggest their exclusion from the classroom from going forward. You know, it, these things also are not very individualized or personalized because student may need accommodation in one classroom that they don't need another. But once you are in the system and you're labeled as disabled, you don't get to say, actually I only needed it in this particular environment because they don't consider the social environment. They just like automatically consider you to be the problem. And they situate the problem within the student, within the student's body, as opposed to within the, the school environment, what the school environment can do to shift, to make it a better learning environment for

everybody. So I think, I hope I've answered the question in full there. I spoke to exactly how disability justice does challenge our normative ideas around education and some of what I've experienced in schools.

Vidya Shah (00:28:35):

Thank you so much. Yes. And I, I, I love, you know, I love the challenging of, of even the concept of normal. And I love the examples that you shared about you in classrooms and how, how practical and, and in many ways simple, it can be to simply just ask a child, what do you need? How are you feeling and listen to them? And of course there's more to that, but I love the, the tangible sort of pieces that we can start to think about as, you know, what does this mean? And what does it look like I'd love to hear from, from you on this question as well, you know, this idea of what does it challenge? What does leading towards disability justice challenge what normative ideas does it challenge, and then what challenges do you face in leading in that way?

Nirmala Erevelles (00:29:18):

Yeah, thank you. And especially thank you for the wonderful way Gillian, and, and then Yasmine both has framed the issues and they talked about at length about this. Part of the issue is that so much of how we think about disability is so rooted and that's that normalization in our practices and the ways in which we perceive things. Because for example, even the word that we use in special education called accommodation. Accommodation is such a paternalistic concept. It means we will go out of hallway and maybe tolerate making a place more welcoming for you in disability studies, disability, justice, critical disability studies. We've always talked about shifting the language to access. When we use the word access. Access, then puts responsibility on the people who are in power in that particular space. It is their responsibility to make the space and the space could be the physical space, the intellectual space, I mean, any kind of space, literally, right. A space, which is welcoming to people who may not be able to access that space. So one of those, like one of the big things in special education that perhaps we need to reflect on the issues of language and the ways in which the language then speaks to the kind of special education policies we produce. The same way I wanted to delve on that part that I know Gillian had mentioned it in her introduction, the issue of pathologization and something that Yasmine also just mentioned. We don't realize how casually in schools, we pathologize students, not just disabled students, all students, because when we talk about whether students are successful or unsuccessful, good, bad, non-disabled, disabled. We use a logic where we locate the blame within the student, and we find medical, psychological, and other proof to then supposedly verify the fact that the problem lies within the child.

Nirmala Erevelles (00:31:42):

We know the damage it does for people. A lot of people of color know the damage it does when you pathologize black bodies, which we've done it historically, we've then had a whole criminal justice system believe that they can be killed at will, that they are dangerous. We know the ways in which police treat white people who break the law. And we know the way they treat black people who break the law. We have a black lives matter movement because it's actually arguing about the notion of pathologization. If we understood that narrative and we applied it then to the everyday work of schooling, we see in so many ways, the very policies of school constitute people who lie at the intersections of race-class. I want to bring in class here, too, disability, gender identity, and sexuality, people who populate one or many of these categories. That's the intersectional, the ways in which schools, school policies, school practices, sometimes school personnel and communities pathologize the people, as opposed to the context in which these things get produced. One of the fallouts of this whole

pandemic is the fact that we've suddenly been brought to bear on this recognition that there's so many of our children and I'm calling them children. I'm not calling them students who are engaging with social and emotional trauma. And our aim is more to medicalize the trauma as opposed to engage the social conditions that produce that trauma on a day to day basis: the excessive competitiveness in schools, the necessity to rank people, according to their abilities obsessively, the ways in which we actively segregate students, we claim that we don't believe in segregation, and yet we produce policies that actively sought students out on the basis of academics, curriculum, you know, the AP advanced classes and the less advanced classes spaces, like of course, special ed. And, then of course, I'm also want to bring in the school to prison pipeline, right? The good kids and the bad kids. And, then we have, at least I'm speaking from the, from the us, I'm pretty sure it ha exist in Canada to the excessive incarcerated,industrial complex that we live in right? And so we have to understand also the role of pathology, the ways in which teachers and casual conversations, pathologize students, let those identities pass through. And then the other part is for us to really think about school discipline, especially in this context. And again, I'm speaking from the perspective of the us, but I'm sure y'all have those of you in Canada have an understanding too, is when we've had all this gun violence and we've had our own children, which has been a very emotional thing for some of us the last few weeks when our own children are not safe in schools, the issue is not again asking the questions about, in what ways are schools brutal places that they constitute some children as wanting to attack others? And instead we blame, instead of looking at the trauma that schools produce, we instead look at this person has a mental health issue. And so we are blaming impairments illnesses or things that become outcomes of the social political violence that many of our children are growing in. And particularly a lot of this came to bear when we had the pandemic, like one of the things I ask administrators when I teach in my classes, don't look for more guns and more locks for your doors. Yeah. I mean, that's okay, what are you doing to make schools, communities? This is what, and this is one of the core things about disability justice is about building community, building communities of care, building communities of interdependence, building communities that resist the actual violence that gets reproduced on a day to day basis in schools and outside schools, the school bullying the ways in which teachers, you know, reprimand students, the ways in which we have those policies. So this issue of how do we, how do we build communities that resist the everyday violence of schools? Schools are, I hate to say violent places for a vast majority of our children, and they're either becoming victims of violence or they become perpetrators of violence too, because of the conditions in which that is actually nurtured. And so I think I would stop there and maybe come back to some of these issues and what I envision can happen a little later on.

Vidya Shah (00:36:51):

Hmm. Thank you so much, Nirmala, thank you for that. I think back to my time in elementary schools and, and the ways in which, as you're saying the normalization of pathologization of children, that, that the everyday conversations, the staff room conversations, the hallway conversations, the ways in which children and their parents are spoken about, it becomes part of, of educator culture to pathologize children. And how do we break that? How do we recognize and why, how is that ever allowed in the first place, but how do we break this, this normalization of this is just how we talk about children, such an such an important piece here. Thank you so much. And, and also thinking about how we teach quote unquote, goodness, andthe intersections of quote, goodness with smartness, with, you know who matters all the ways in which these pieces sort of come together. Uh and that we teach that and we teach, we teach white innocence, right? We teach that we teach black guilt that these are relational concepts that, that breed on each other. And in how we choose to engage in discipline. And other sorts of means we're actually teaching children how to live in a world that continues to associate whiteness

with innocence, with smartness, with all, all kinds of things. My brain, my brain is going, this is exciting. Jeff, we'd love to have you have you comment on this question as well.

Jeff Hall (00:38:20):

Yeah. It's it's admittedly, it's very difficult to, to follow both the Yasmine and Nirmala after this. But but I, I think to, to just kind of answer the question, like, how does disability justice disrupt normative ideas of schooling? If we did even if we, if we had the slight spin of disability justice in our schools, we would be uprooting so many different aspects of our education system from assessment practices to the discipline practices that Nirmala talked about to even the, the ways that we, even when systems are trying to destream and detrack students, those streaming systems and those, those tracking devices are still happening within schools in, in different ways. I think some of the challenges has to do with really the lack of critical awareness just around disability in general, that a lot of educators have, and I, I think a lot of educational leaders have, and I guess kind of speak from that educational leadership standpoint. Um many educational leaders are, are great at talking about sort of equity in a variety of different ways. But if you were to ask some of those administrators and system leaders to talk about disability in our schools they would be stopped dead in their tracks. And to Gillian's point early on, we have entire massive departments and systems devoted to disability. We're spending, you know, millions of dollars on, on quote unquote supports and personnel and policies. I don't know of any other situation where so much resource is being poured into something with such a, a great lack of critical awareness for that aspect. Right. so for me as a leader, I think the challenges, you know, and I don't wanna repeat cuz you know, both what Yasmine and Nirmala said were, were spot on for me, some of the challenges too, have to deal with, how do I bring more critical awareness of disability, of not just the needs of disability and access, but also I'm building community around disability. Talking about things like disabled joy, talking about the intersectionality between say ableism and racism. And again, to, to Jillian's point how they're collusive with one another how do I bring that kind of awareness to the school community that I serve? That's sort of a big challenge I think for us, but I think it, it's a challenge that we need to be, we need to be we need to be picking away at that challenge. We need to be We need to be taking that head on, I think,

Vidya Shah (00:41:36):

Thank you so much, Jeff. Thank you. And you know, I, I love theuh the system perspective that you're, that you're bringing into this conversation. You know, the, the very idea that the systems and policies and programs that we, that we put into place, and as we're saying, poured millions of dollars into are actually the mechanisms that are continuing to sort and stream children in very problematic ableist ways. And, you know, I think about this often that you know, when we, when we look at how schools and school districts try to attend to issues of, of inequity there's folks that are talking about racism, and then there's folks that are talking about ableism, but it's done even. I mean, even if you look at like departments and how departments are created, it's done in such a siloed way, it actually creates the conditions to not deal with it intersectionally, to not address it intersectionally. And I think about how much further we would move to in terms of creating these communities of care for all children if we really started to, to interrogate the ways in which these logics are operating across these sort of siloed departments. And so thank you so much for naming that. And, you know, again, I think about this often that the, the, the systems and the structures that we create, or that are intended to provide greater access to change the way we think, think about things to provide supports actually become the mechanisms that are the gatekeepers that are the very structures that cause further harm. And I'm wondering if anyone wants to speak to that, you know, this idea of what do we do? How do we think structurally about these, these types of things, like what needs to happen for the structure to actually work in favor of students and not,

and not just become another mechanism of sorting and stratifying. Go ahead, Nirmala. Yeah, I would love to

Nirmala Erevelles (00:43:26):

Hear part of it. It kind of answers your question, but it was also something I wanted to talk about and I was going to code from this because one of the structures of schooling is that we are supposed to break down difference. In other words, we say celebrate, we have, you know, diversity equity and inclusion committees, but the whole logic of schools is to produce a kind of conformity to rules. And for most disabled students, particularly what's most dangerous is this logic of the conditional acceptance into the mainstream. And this hurts particularly students of color, but actually most disabled students too. And I was going to, this was another thing that I would like for you to put on your website. It's you'll find it under this blog called blog space called just stemming. And it's just stimming. And it's a poem by Julia Bascom, B A S C O M.

Speaker 3 (00:44:30):

I was just going read this like this, like just to talk about what happens to autistic children, children who identify, who identified as autistic and watch how she reads it in a classroom of language impaired kids. "The Most common phrase is a metaphor, quiet hands. A student pushes at a piece of paper. Flaps their hands stacks, their fingers against their Palm pokes at a pencil, rubs their palms through their hair. It's silent until quiet hands. I have yet to meet a student who didn't instinctively know to pull back and put their hands in their lap at this order. Thanks to applied behavioral analysis. Each student learned this phrase in preschool at the latest hands slapped down and held to a table or at their sides for a count of three, until they learn to restrain themselves. At the words, the literal meaning of the words is irrelevant when you're being abused. When I was a little girl, I was autistic. And when you are autistic, it's not abuse. It's considered therapy".

Nirmala Erevelles (00:45:51):

I wanted to put that out there because I know that when I teach, teach, like when we talk about the structural, the structural can also be very concrete. And the ways in which what we do every day as therapeutic practice can be experienced by students as abuse is a kind of a way, one of the ways in which we need to challenge the structural context of schooling is what is it that we are normalizing schooling for? What are our practices? And then what is the impact was one of the other things that Gillian had mentioned earlier when students are at the intersections, you'll see, like in the school district where, in which I live the kids of color, students of color who have some kind of disability, that's not covered in the like, quote unquote, the regular framework of the IDA, which is our disability law for schools are students who have some, you know, who speak back. The students who like, you know, a lot of the students who are like challenging the system and they get thrown out of school and sent to alternative school for little things like speaking back to the teacher for pushing at something when the stimulation was too loud and they couldn't control themselves for being bullied, right? So they get sent out of school and they get criminalized. And that school to prison pipeline, which actually a long time ago, when I had come to speak at Toronto a while ago, somebody reminded me. And I like that it was said in Toronto that it's not the school to prison pipeline, because there was a young man in the crowd who said, many of us disabled people of color have experienced schools like prisons, so that the behavior therapy, the things which, you know, which again, Gillian was mentioning earlier, the things that were supposed to be good, we're supposed to be helping and mentioned that too. So did Jeff, the things that we were supposed to be helping sometimes when we talk about structures, they seem as if they're abstract, but some of these structures are really very, very concrete. And that simple question, how are you experiencing school?

Have you ever, like, if we are always talking at particularly students of color, but like particularly low income students of color, particularly students of color for whom English, or is not their first language, it's those people whom we talk down to, we pathologize, we take away the space for voice, for listening, for hearing, for caring. So in some ways that the structural is really, I keep going back to the structural and that's what disability justice is about. The structure is not that abstract. It's not in the distant future, we are going to see a time when life's going to turn around the structural for disability, the disability justice, the reason they were able to articulate it really well was because it was their experiences that were very real, tangible, and the ways in which they had to engage, like they had to, in some ways, push back or actually create alternatives to throw this kind of like what traditional schooling or traditional ways to survive and the ways in which capitalism works and find alternatives, building community, building collectives that in some ways supported each other outside of this kind of debilitating, violent, traumatic prison like space.

Vidya Shah (00:49:39):

No, that was beautiful. Thank you, Nirmala. Thank you. And Yasmine, I know that you wanted to share some thoughts on this question too.

Yasmine Gray (00:49:45):

Yeah, I will share really quickly. I think it's important for educators to really see their role also as advocates. I think lots of times, people who are in the helping professions, they are trained in school to only focus on relational care, you know, and individualism. So your individual relationships with the students, but I think it's important you also see yourself as being part of a system and having more power, more social power than the children that you work with and making it also part of your practice to be an advocate, and to actually be able to look at those macro level systems that result in poor educational outcomes for the children that you're working with when you shift in that way, and I think it can really empower. I also think it can open up the kinds of interventions then that are possible.

Vidya Shah (00:50:45):

Beautiful. Thank you so much, Yasmine. I love that. I love that, that it's, it's not just this individual relational care piece. It's also thinking about how we need to stand for collective identities and the ways in which particular identities are pathologized and given less access. Thank you. So, you know, I think about Nirmala you were sharing about communities of care collectives. These are spaces that, you know, as educators, we would want every child to be part of and that care will look different and that care will be experienced differently, but to be in these spaces. And it makes me think about the possibilities that emerge. When we think about leading for disability justice, what possibilities emerge for schooling for leaders? You know, I also think about the kinds of spaces that we need to create for leaders to experience this kind of community of care so that they can then think about what it means to create these spaces in their schools. And when I say leaders in this, in this capacity, I mean, sort of formal hierarchical leaders, but leaders in any space, how do we experience what it, it means to be like to live in, to be part of a community of care so that we can think about and consider creating the conditions for that elsewhere. So this question really is what possibilities emerge from leading for disability justice. And what would you hope that leaders might take away from this conversation? So, Jeff, maybe we'll, we'll start with you here.

Jeff Hall (00:52:14):

I don't normally rely a lot on, on sort of representation and sometimes, sometimes we can get in equity work. We can get too caught up in the idea of representation, as long as someone is at the table. Then it means that we don't have to do any more equity work or racism is, is somehow stopped as long as there are say black or indigenous leaders. I, I think with disability though, in specifically with disability in schools, I do think there needs to be a more of an openness around disabled educatorsand specifically disabled education leaders too, because I think students need to see those perspectives. Students need to disabled students often never see themselves represented in schools. They're always seen as someone who is on the margins within the school and they, they rarely see someone with their own experiences.

Speaker 5 (00:53:24):

So often when teachers talk about sort of their own experiences in high school or, or even, or in any kind of educational setting, whether it's, and it's not just teachers, it's also administrators. They often talk about, well, you know, quote, we were the, we were the good ones in school, right? We were the ones who were successful. We were the ones who could navigate the system and that's not true for, for all educators. And that's certainly not true for all educational leaders, particularly those who are disabled, but also people who are experiencing different intersectional oppressions, such as ableism and racism. So I, I think that representation for one does kind of matter in this situation. And it could go a long way because the idea of talking about disability other than sort of a deficit within a school systemuh is so frowned upon. I think the other thing that I think that leaders need to kind of take away from this conversation is and this goes back to just sort of talking openly about being more critically aware again of disability and disability justice within schools. But also really critically examining when we're talking about different aspects of sort of educational inequity reform. Are we putting that disability lens on there as well, or that disability justice lens? So one of the examples I think about is sort of this interest in, in gifted programs and in specialized programs where there's this focus on breaking down barriers, say for giftedness for for black students, for indigenous students. And while that's great, because historically those students have been excluded from categories of giftedness. We rarely talk about sort of the constructions of giftedness and how sort of ableism and racism work together to create those constructions in the first place. So I think that as educational leaders, we need to have those conversations as well. And I think we need people in our schools and in our systems equipped to have those conversations. So that issues of disability don't just get relegated to special education programs, to ideas of, you know, quote unquote, as we talked about before of just the idea of, of accommodation, you know, we talk more about sort of what does access look like and what does that look like within, within a sort of educational community?

Vidya Shah (00:56:06):

Thank you so much, Jeff. That's so great. And it's, it's just making me think about, as you were saying earlier about, you know, so many for, for many educators or for, you know, for many people that are, that are in K to 12 schooling and, and beyond they have had successful quote unquote successful experiences they have been socialized into, and they have met the expectations of whiteness and ableness and all these sorts of, of, of, of pieces. And, and when we think about that, what does that mean in terms of the kinds of spaces that need to be created? That there's an undoing, I think, in so many educators that needs to happen around where we place our own value, how we think of ourselves, how we construct ourselves and our sense of worth and value in the world that has been tool to us in many ways that has been showed to us. And in many ways within a system that does, again, socialize us into whiteness and socialize us into all of these different systems, what does it mean to undo that so that we can actually make different spaces for children and classrooms and communities and, and, and elsewhere. So I'm,

I'm, I'm thinking about that. I'm thinking about that a lot. Nirmala would love to hear your thoughts on this question. Possibilities.

Nirmala Erevelles (00:57:25):

Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. And thank you, Jeff, for pointing out particularly the, the kind of like superficial ways in which we use the politics of representation, because I want to work on that point a little more from a different angle in the sense that white supremacy is very adept at pitting minority groups against each other, particularly in school, particularly in context, where they are scarce resources. So at least in my town, I was one time witnessing parents of color and a low income school complaining about the special ed kids who were taking the resources from the school. And I understood there was scarce resources and there was not a capacity to share them. And they were like, our kids have potential. Why are they being wasted on those kids? And I had to remind them and, you know, have a different conversation about that's the ways in which white people talk about people of color in general. And also because, and this may be the more unpopular comment that anti-racist , queer, feminist movements of like people who do those kinds of pedagogies are also very adept at reproducing ableism. And then of courseGillian had pointed out in an introduction, the disability rights movement also, or people who are like, who have been successfully been able to, or even if they've struggled through, through school systems, most of them are being predominantly white, upper class English speaking, cuz I have to use English. Speaking is also a kind of like oppressive category. So that's one of the most critical parts about not letting ourselves. It's not that you've gotta speak to every, every oppression at all times, but how do we constitute schooling? Which is a very much disability justice theme. How do we build community across difference in resistance to white supremacist settler, colonial catalyst state? Right? So that's one of the issues. And one of the ways to do it is in the curriculum where in the curriculum, is there any discussion of disability beyond it being a space of charity or pity or accentuating some kind of deviance. Where in the curriculum to disable people of and disabled people of color or where, where is in the curriculum? Do we see the ways in which these arguments that we are making here is that how racism, ableism,capitalism and gen, you know, sex of patriarchy and hetero basically heteropatriarchy, how do they all contribute to the constructions of difference? Where is there history of the ways in which we have used disability to racism, eugenics, we don't read about it like a Nazi Germany. If you're learning about the Holocaust and you don't talk about disability, because Nazi in Nazi Germany, they created the gas chambers by practicing on the disabled people, because remember the notion of Arian supremacy was based on ableist concepts of difference.

Speaker 3 (01:01:07):

So we need a curriculum to do that, but we also need a curriculum. And this is I'm quoting Alison Schaffer and also all, mostly all the people in Sins Invalid, because it's like they've all the argument about why can't we imagine disability futures? What would the world look like, how would we reconfigure the world from the context of people who are actually living really creative, really resilient, really courageous, really passionate lives. We've always produced disability as something to be compensated for. Right. But what, where is this disability? I, Jeff I know mentioned it at one point, where is this notion of disability, joy, disability, future this notion of actually the subtitle of Sins Invalid is an unashamed. Look at the beauty at our beauty at, at, at our beauty, right? This idea of imagining alternatives and the best. Like I always tell whenever, like this is something for administrators and school leaders and teachers, and even students to think about the best view you can ever get of a broader situation is actually at the margins because you're looking from out, the vector is so much broader for you to see so that we are. So we are asking that the school curriculum rather than centralizing moves to the borders and then produces those kinds of practices, where we reject the historical ways in which we've either we've

constructed difference as deviance. And that we've used the logic of disability to justify, not just ableism, but also racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, you know, the genderism that's going on because they're all constituted when I'm tying it back to that issue of pathology. So in what ways are we also going to depathologize everyday concepts that we teach so casually in the curriculum, that's what a disability justice framework would actually have to destroy. Literally the kinds of things that we are and reframe it. And you can do it from kindergarten in itself. How would you teach students about difference students recognize difference. How do you teach about difference? That does not hierarchize that that's not demean, that that's not also pit kids who are different against each other for the small, sometimes crappy resources that are being offered then. So,

Vidya Shah (01:04:03):

Oh, Nirmala, I I'm just, I'm just imagining as you're talking what this classroom would look like, what this school would look like, and it is such a beautiful place. Thank you for sharing that. Thank you for sharing those ideas. So Yasmine, we would love to hear from you on this question around what possibilities emerge from leading for disability justice or leading towards disability justice. And what do you hope that leaders might take away from today's conversation?

Yasmine Gray (01:04:28):

I'll answer succinctly and say that I think that all of the possibilities emerge from leading for disability justice. Fundamentally, it doesn't have to look this way. It doesn't have to be this way. That's the possibilities. Like the possibilities are endless. We don't need to talk about reforming special education. For example, special education doesn't need to exist. We don't need to talk about police and schools not having police in schools, school resource officers. No <laugh>. We don't have to do that. We don't have to police our students in that way. So I just think the possibilities are endless. And you know, my favorite thing about working with children is, Ugh, for children, their possibilities are endless! You ask a child, what does a cop free future look like? You ask a four year old, what a police free future looks like. You ask a four year old, how can we keep each other safe? Their ideas are out of this world, man. They understand abolition far better than grown adults do. <Laugh> because they aren't constrained with kind of the way that the world has told us: No, that's not possible. No, we can't do that. No, wait your turn. No, there's not the budget for that. No, we couldn't be so radical. So that's what I have to say about that. I hope that leaders walk away from this conversation with with the open-mindedness and the wonder and the kind of limitless imagination that children have when they think about things.

Vidya Shah (01:06:04):

Love that. Love that. Thank you. Yasmine. For those of you that are only hearing us, there are smiles across the screen right now as we're recording this. Oh my goodness. What amazing insights. Thank you all three. Thank you so much for your, for your contributions. And I'd love to turn it over now,to Gillian to share some final thoughts about,what she's, what she's been hearing and,and how she's making sense of it, Gillian, over to you.

Gillian Parekh (01:06:33):

Wow. Thank you so much video. And thank you all. This has been such an incredibly generative discussion and I know I was supposed to have some closing thoughts to end end it. But there were just so many important points that I think speak directly to the conditions within, within schools. I just wanna pick up on a few of them. You know, when we think about the challenge of adopting disability justice in schools, you know, I really appreciate Yasmin's point about how our structures of exclusion are so

normalized. You know, I always ask my class of pre candidate teachers to think back about their experience with special education. You know, where were the special education classrooms in your school? How did students arrive to school? What happened on field trips? And as we discuss together, you can see this growing discomfort and how, you know, they are realizing that they were themselves schooled within explicitly exclusionary structures.

Gillian Parekh (01:07:26):

And this is likely how our parents experience school, how we experience school and what we as educators are risk of replicating without, you know, intentional interruption. What Nirmala shared around shifting language from accommodations, which is, which is based on, you know, individual student to access, which puts the onus on the system to provide is so critical addressing and eliminating you know, what normal is shared about the casual way in which students are pathologized challenged the ranking of students and organizing students or the organizing of students into hierarchies, you know, encourage our leaders to engage in the social conditions that can produce trauma, you know, address the obsession with ranking and engage in community building. What does it mean to build communities of care in schools of interdependence? What would that look like? Like imagine communities that resist the violence of schools.

Gillian Parekh (01:08:21):

And I also really appreciate what Jeff shared on what it would take to change, you know, adopting principles of disability justice would mean that we would have to rethink our assessment practices, our discipline practices, addressing all of our non explicit forms of streaming and segregation. I know in Ontario, right now, there is a move towards destreaming, you know, particularly in grade nine. But those of us that have worked within these education systems understand that that streaming will very much likely continue to take place, but in implicit forms that aren't as easily reported or identified. I, I really appreciate Vidya your point about silos and how they you know, create the conditions that don't allow for these communities of interdependence that we would hope for to develop or be fostered in schools. You know, when thinking about how, you know, how do we challenge the logic of conformity, as Nirmala said, that the idea that difference is deviance the conditional acceptance into the mainstream.

Gillian Parekh (01:09:16):

I see that that fear in students a lot about, you know, will this be what makes me not belong in this space? If I ask the teacher one more time for this accommodation, if I ask one more time for the restrictions to be repeated, will this mean they'll ask me to move to a different class. You know, and how do we confront therapeutic practice that can be experienced as Nirmala said by students as abuse? I think that is, again, coming back to that point, we need to, we need to talk to students. We need to listen to students you know, rarely are policies made or co-constructed with students. And how, like Jeff mentioned, how do we challenge the ableism that is actually constituted into our very programs, the programs that are very privileged and sought after, within our, within our systems, you know, how do we address that, that embedded ableism there as well? So I feel like this talk has, has really left me wondering, and I hope it has for those tuning in as well. You know, what it would be like to imagine alternatives disability, futures, and disability, joy in schools, you know, and closing it with what Yasmine said. It really doesn't have to look this way. So thank you so much for for, including me in this piece. It was such an incredibly awesome discussion.

Vidya Shah (01:10:30):

Mm Gillian, thank you so much. Thank you so much. Thank you to all of you. There's, there's so much love I feel in my heart right now. I can't explain it. I think in part it's this idea of actually dreaming different futures of what willing can be and what, what it can be like. And that just fills me with so much joy and so much hope. And so I wanna just say to all, all of you here today, thank you for your insights, for your wisdom, for your experiences and for your heart and your passion in this work and for, for inviting us to dream differently, I think is one of the most powerful takeaways for me and I'm hoping for the listeners as well. I wanna thank the listeners for tuning in to another episode of the UnLeading podcast. This Codreaming idea has has, is, is, is really, is really doing a number on me all of us dreaming together. And so folks, thank you again for tuning in to another episode of the unleaded podcast. We hope you'll tune in again,