



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #11 - Lacy Robinson (UnbounEd)

- Speaker 1: If you don't have your anti-racist, anti-biased lens on, you literally will regenerate segregation, systematic racism in your instruction, Just in your instructional moves. White, black, it doesn't matter, well all inhale the smog and we will exhale it back into the environment if we're not careful.
- Speaker 2: The results, they've been immediate And we've had one of the biggest shifts in the state.
- Speaker 3: It's almost magical when it all comes together and I think to myself, "This is what education is about."
- Speaker 4: There were inequities everywhere. My students in south Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 5: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills and that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 6: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these student's lives and I just want to shout from the rooftops, it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders in Literacy. A podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity and build equity by improving literacy.

Jessica Hamman: First, a word from our sponsors. TypeDojo is a free online program that teaches kids how to type. By tracking student progress and offering positive reinforcement, TypeDojo ensures that students improve their keyboarding skills and feel successful while doing it. TypeDojo has earned the kid safe seal for child-friendly websites and is great to use, to teach, touch typing for students at any grade level. Learn more and sign up for free by heading to typedojo.com that's T-Y-P-E-D-O-J-O.com.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And on the show today is Lacy Robinson, the Chief Executive Officer of Unbound Ed. Admired and respected for her contributions in education, Ms. Robinson is a passionate former teacher, school



leader and widely sought after keynote speaker. Her life's work aims to eradicate a student provision gap still predictable by race. Lacy, it is such a pleasure to have you here today.

Lacy Robinson: Thank you, Jessica. I'm super excited.

Jessica Hamman: You are so accomplished as a leader in the education space. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got started in education to begin with and orient us to what inspired you to work as a change agent for educational equity?

Lacy Robinson: Yes. Well, I think my story actually starts with my experience going to school. I grew up in Dayton, Ohio, Dayton and Akron, Ohio. And upon my parents around the age of five or six getting a divorce, we moved to a community where my sister and I were one of the two families of color in the neighborhood so we essentially integrated the neighborhood. And as a little girl, I had no perception or even understood what that meant, I just knew that I clung to my sister's side as we walked to school. And oftentimes either walking to school or walking home, we fell victim to Toms and harassment from the neighborhoods kids. And in school, I knew that I was an anomaly because I was either always the only child of color or only the black child in a classroom.

Lacy Robinson: And yet I knew I love to learn. There was this thing that I craved to always want to know more, whether it was always asking questions or looking through books. And I would say in my first grade year,



my mother noticed I struggled with learning how to read. She knew the previous year as a kindergartner, I could not grasp the alphabet, I struggled with memorizing the letters and the sounds. And she often talks about walking into my bedroom during my kindergarten year and listening to me in my sleep saying the alphabet or going over the sounds and it would just break her heart that even when she's sleeping, she's still trying to digest the letters and the sounds. But I got passed on the first grade, which was a little signal to my mom like if she's struggling so much to read and reading so foundational, why isn't anyone stretching to help her?

Lacy Robinson: I got passed on the first grade and I struggled through first grade. So to be a child of color, the only child of color in a classroom and an entire school and an entire neighborhood and community, and to struggle in your learning, it starts to grow this, what I call a pebble then a Pearl then a rock then a Boulder feeling that you have that you are not worthy, that you are not counted, that you are not fully human if you are constantly being put on the outside of things and being made fun of. And so my mom often talks about the stress she knew my sister and I were under living in a neighborhood and going to a system that was predominantly white and yet she made that decision because at the time in Dayton, Ohio, there was a lot of white flight in the communities of color.

Lacy Robinson: And we know that historically when white flight happens then comes the onset of red lining communities and it just starts this tumultuous wave of inequalities. And oftentimes those inequalities first show up in schools. And so she felt like she didn't have a choice. I have to sacrifice their psychological wellbeing so that they can learn to read, right, be mathematicians, scientists and grow their



curiosity about learning. And so as a child, kindergarten, first grade, tons of talks, while my mom was doing my hair, you don't listen to what they say. You go in and you learn and despite what the teacher does and does not do, you grab as much as you can and when you get home, we're going to go over it because you're brilliant.

Lacy Robinson: And so in the first grade they wanted to pass and on the second, still couldn't read, still couldn't recognize letters and my mother said, "Enough, I'm not doing it. I am holding her back whether you want me to or not." And let me tell you something, that was a miracle decision because that very next year, I got a teacher by the name of Ms. Montgomery. Ms. Montgomery was the loveliest woman I had ever seen. She smelled like oatmeal cookies.

Lacy Robinson: And Ms. Montgomery not only took the time out along with a co-teacher of hers, another teacher that was across the hall, her name was Mrs. Littleton. They decided that Ms. Montgomery was going to spend my reading time really getting me into phonics, learning the code and Ms. Littleton after school was going to continue to tutor me. And Ms. Montgomery did something extraordinary, that was the same year that Jane Elliott's bluest eye began to catch back on. She had done it in the '70s. This was the early '80s and it was coming back up again. And unbeknownst to me as a second time first grader, Ms. Montgomery took this, what I call extraordinary challenge and she did the bluest eye experiment with us first graders. She divided the class up. If you're blonde hair, stand over here. If you're brown hair, stand over here. If your skin is this color, stand back here.



Lacy Robinson: And she used the entire day to do the bluest eye experiment. For the first time in my little life, I felt human in school. I watched as some of my classmates cried because she told them they couldn't eat lunch because they have blue eyes. I watched as the same little boys that Tom sent me were in the corner kicking the wall because she told them that they couldn't use a pencil because they had brown hair. And I don't want to say that I reveled in their misery but what happened was for the first time I felt that they connected with my pain and it changed my year and it changed who I was as a student and it changed me to have the audacity to push back and say I belong here. So that's where I think my love of education, my activism, all of that got the start button was pressed that second time around in first grade.

Jessica Hamman: It occurred to me when you're talking about your experience in school, that what may have been perceived as reading difficulties or even dyslexia by your teachers could have been just incredible discomfort with the situation you were in and a lack of security and feeling of safety in the school environment. So tell us a little bit more about that and how you tease apart what may be the identification of learning disabilities with the trauma of racism in the classroom?

Lacy Robinson: Yeah, I think that's an excellent question and I think that's a question that we don't acknowledge particularly as we go through the process of identifying students who might have learning disabilities. And I will tell you in my research, I was floored when I found medical research documents that told a story of the effects of racism on the human brain. Moore's Law will tell you, if you don't



feel safe, your human brain is not going to function at a level where it will take in learning. It goes into protection mode, fight, flight or freeze. And so I know to be true, I experienced as a student that when Ms. Montgomery and Ms Littleton brought me into their fold, protected me, made me feel like there was someone on a daily basis that was looking out for my wellbeing, I immediately started devouring letters, sounds, words, books, I couldn't get enough of it.

Lacy Robinson: And so that's something that I would love for us as an educational policy and practice and leadership community to begin to consider as we start to identify [inaudible 00:11:32] black students for special education. Is this truly a learning disability or could this be an effect of the students having marginalized experiences that are actually playing a role in their ability to learn is something that was highlighted for me the whole time I was in school. By the time I got to high school, I never made it out of algebra. I hated math. I couldn't understand why it clicked for some and not others. And it wasn't until I got to the HBCU and I could not pass the freshmen entrance exam, the math part that had a professor that said, "You should go to the student services building, meet Ms. such and such."

Lacy Robinson: I got diagnosed with dyscalculia. Once they taught me the strategies to live with the dyscalculia, mathematics broke open for me. I love numbers. And then as an educator, once I learned about the foundational concepts and skills of math like [inaudible 00:12:36] and cardinality, it also played a role in how I acquired math. So I feel like I sat in both instances where I might've been over identified as having a learning disability around reading and was actually the outcome of being in a racist environment, and then I was under



identified as having a disability in mathematics as just being lazy, not really trying. My math teacher said she was too busy putting lip gloss on to learn the algebraic formulas when really all along it was dyscalculia.

Jessica Hamman: And the commonality between those two things is that given the correct path, you've flourished in both capacities.

Lacy Robinson: Yes. Can you imagine, what we used to call a sit meeting where you bring your list of students that you have concerns about and everyone sits around a table, can you imagine that if on that form, there was a question that says, being exposed to a marginalized environment that is not supportive, can you imagine us having that dialogue and how many students we might serve differently?

Jessica Hamman: Well, and once you become aware of how important it is to the education of students, what actually should be the question is, can you imagine not having it on that survey? And when we get to that point then we'll know that we have an awareness of the constructs of racism in education to support students in a full capacity.

Lacy Robinson: Yeah. And I'm sure you know from all the research, all the exposure around the misidentification that students of color have with dyslexia, oftentimes their child is having ADHD or LD or some other label, and they spend their entire coursework in school carrying that label that was misidentified and then they get to the moment where they get to make a decision, do I continue my



educational track or do I try to go out and get a job, make money and get ahead? And never having been stopped and evaluated in appropriate way, people are making life decisions that affect not just them but the generations to come.

Jessica Hamman: Absolutely. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got into teaching?

Lacy Robinson: I will say two things. First, there's a scene in one of my favorite movies, *The Color Purple*. When it premiered, my momma dressed us up, marched us down to the theater, we had moved to Akron, Ohio by then. And there's a scene where Celie's sister, Nettie, is teaching her to read and she's put words all over the kitchen and they're sounding the words out. And I could feel that little first grader in me. That scene in that movie, just the spark and I was just like, I want to do that. I want to know what that feels like to know that you're teaching someone something and the joy and the power at the same time that came across in that scene. And so I left that movie determined to teach my grandmother how to read.

Lacy Robinson: Now, it wasn't anything that was said in our family. No one went around saying grandma couldn't read but I knew that she struggled reading her Bible and she had a Bible that pictures in it. I also knew that the religious community that she was involved in, they were teaching her how to read. And so I would bring my little self and I'd sit next to her and I'd help her sound the words out like they helped me sound out the words and that was my spark of teaching. Now my mother will tell you, I told her I wanted to be an actress, a star, a



broadcast, a weather woman. And my mom would just sit there and listen. And my mother said the whole time she knew, she's going to be a teacher. So by the time I got to college, I went to HBCU, the Florida A & M University.

Lacy Robinson: And I had decided, okay, you know what? I'll try this teaching thing. I'll placate her for a while until I get found as a star. It bit me. Learning about how to learn at the same time being at an HBCU and for the first time in my life, learning about the African-American history in the United States and who my ancestors were. And this is going to sound really crazy but I am for the first time in my life as a college student, I grew up in Akron, Ohio. Everything in Akron, Ohio at the time was black and white. You either black or you are white. It did not matter your ethnicity, your nationality, you either black or you were white. And I remember landing on campus and there were people of color from California and The Bahamas and Arizona, Utah, and they had accents, and they liked rock music. And it was this cornucopia of people of color and I was amazed that people of color were not what I was always grounded in the same.

Lacy Robinson: So that also propelled me to want to give that glimpse, that window to students. Because I knew inevitably students of color, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods, we're getting that same message I got, you're all the same, you're not counted, we don't really see you. We don't see you until you assimilate. So that was the other thing that fueled me to want to get in teaching. And then I would say my experience in my residency at the Marva Collins Preparatory School in Cincinnati, Ohio. Now that was the rocket ship because I walked into that building that was run by Mrs.



[inaudible 00:18:16] who I think has since passed, God rest her soul. And she had me observe a second and third grade class. And the thing about the Marva Collins school was Marva Collins was an advocate at the time that I now know for the science of reading.

Lacy Robinson: She knew that in order for students to grasp, to become literate, they had to be taught the code. They needed to know the foundational pieces for reading. And so those teachers started with their kids in kindergarten. It was a requirement. You started as a kindergarten teacher with your class and you matriculated up with them all the way up to fifth grade and then you dropped back down. She wanted every single teacher in that building to be skilled in the science of reading. That was the only way you could make it. And so when I went to observe the second and third grade class, I talk about this, I walked in on that first day and these were all students in Cincinnati, Ohio whose parents had removed them out of the public school or they had been kicked out of the public school. Can you imagine that by second grade? What have you done?

Lacy Robinson: So the class was about maybe I would say 35 to 36 children. It was packed. And I walked in and they were reading animal farm. I almost screamed. I was like, surely that's not what I think it is. And she's reading from the text and there's a scene where the horse is talking. I remember I got flashed back to ninth grade and I was like, oh my God. And then she started calling on the students to read the text and I started crying. I had to get up and walk out of the class because I had never seen black children in such brilliance.



Jessica Hamman: Actually the truth of it is sitting in their real potential. It shatters the belief gap that is present and that is so harmful. So you left that moment and where do you go from there?

Lacy Robinson: I'd say it was a lot of grace and blessings. I left Marva Collins. I taught in Georgia for a few years. I had some friends who were from New York and I had traveled overseas right after I graduated and I fell in love with Paris. Couldn't afford it. I had friends in New York who were like, "You should move to New York." And I was like, "Oh, New York's kind of like Paris." And I was like, "But what am I going to do in New York?" And they were like, "Why don't you go to Columbia University's Teacher's College?" And I was like, "What is that?" Because I will tell you as an African-American student, we don't always get all of the information about the programs and schools and colleges and possibilities. Maybe because regionally, maybe because no one ever took the time.

Lacy Robinson: And she was like, "Oh, it's teacher's college. You never heard of teacher's college." I was like, "I didn't even know they had a teacher's college." So I was like, "I'll apply." Well my GPA was so high at Florida A&M. By the way, I have to say this, I graduated high school with a 1.97. I got to college and never went below a three, five and by the time I graduated, I was a 4.0. So I applied and I get in. They were like, "You don't even take the graduate exam." So I move to New York, I'm sitting in class with a professor who was well-known and I'm getting upset by what she's saying in terms of students of color learning language. And everyone's sitting there taking notes because she's honored and admired in the education field. And they're taking notes-



Jessica Hamman: Would you care to mention who it is?

Lacy Robinson: It's going to be provocative but I will tell you. It was Lucy Calkins class. And she made a statement about teaching black students the money language. And I was like, the money language. She talking about dollars and cents. What do you mean the money language? She was talking about standard English. So that little first grader in me who had gone to college-

Jessica Hamman: Had come right back in that class.

Lacy Robinson: I was livid. I literally stood up and was like, "What are you talking about?" I didn't know Lucy Calkins, I didn't know anything about the writing project. I didn't know anything about the writing process. I couldn't tell you who she was. And I guess me sparring with her struck her because I remember she called me after class and asked me if I was interested in working with her and I was like, were just here. And I later learned that that Lucy admires. She's not the kind of intellect that just, she wants to be sparred with at least at that time.

Lacy Robinson: That's what introduced professional develop to me. That was my first time ever even knowing there was actually a job that in education. I was in graduate school so I had an opportunity to learn



from Linda Darling-Hammond, Ken Barnes. I was just plopped in the midst. I was introduced to Lisa Delpit. And so all of that plus working with the writing project, going out into schools, teaching them readers and writers workshop, it just propelled me to want to continuously lift educators up because I knew that ultimately what I found is that the more nurturing you give to the teachers that some of that nurturing gets poured into students but there was always something missing.

Lacy Robinson: And it wasn't until I got to Montgomery County schools that I was introduced to race and equity work and education and realize that even if you give teachers the information, the pedagogy, the know-how, the content knowledge, if their bias lens is intact, it's still going to be withheld from the students of color. And so working in Montgomery County schools, being an equity specialist, I spent three and a half, four years grounding myself in some of the form of the work in race and equity and anti-racism, Alfred Tatum, Beverly Tatum, Gloria Ladson, Billings, folks that I had heard in my HBCU but now I was taking their work and applying it to teach a professional and lead a professional development. And so that's been my track. I left there, became a middle school turnaround principal with new leaders.

Jessica Hamman: Tell us a little bit about that experience. I had heard about your work as a turnaround specialist and I'm curious, did that come after your work as an equity specialist? And if so, did you find that you still had any beliefs that needed to be disrupted in order to support that work?



Lacy Robinson: Yeah. I will tell you that that was proof that it doesn't matter how much you study. Until you are in it and facing it and continuously raising your conscious level up, you will inhale the smog of racism and go right to your habits of actually rebirthing it. And so as a turnaround principle, I have deep regrets of what I accepted from a system. That was predominantly people of color. I will tell you that, in a predominantly people of color community.

Jessica Hamman: Well, isn't that the very root of systemic racism. It doesn't just affect one group, it's systemic among everyone in the system.

Lacy Robinson: Yes. And if you have white colleagues and coworkers and leaders who themselves have not faced their own biases, they along with you will perpetuate it because it just is the way things are. And so the day that I was handing my keys to my building, I wasn't told to raise the 18% proficient literacy rate, 23% proficient in math for the seventh and eighth graders, 978 of them. That's not what I was charged to do. They chuckled as they passed me to keys and told me to get the murder rate down in the building. There was this picture painted of those students in that community that I was going into war. And not that this was a community that had been marginalized and that had not been given the appropriate support or even recognizing that everyone had lost hope and possibility of what those students in that community could do.

Lacy Robinson: And so I was put on guard and I was told that I was being watched closely. And so I went in with my guard up and wanting to prove not just to the leaders but to the students that, you're more than



this. And unfortunately I did not allow my anti-racist, my anti-bias antenna to remain up because fear took over, which is another fallout of systemic racism and it predicated all of my actions. And I so wanted the students to model assimilationist, values, postures like I did because that's how I made it. That I had moments quite often that I forgot to see them for who they were and the beauty that they were bringing into the building. As I got to know them, I would see their brilliance. We looked at our spread count and it was no way near what they were saying.

Lacy Robinson: By the second year when we entered the building, there were 978 students and the previous year there were 1,000 suspensions. So there were more suspensions than there were students. I literally asked, were you guys suspending the teachers too? About the second year, our suspension rate had dropped so far down and we weren't removing students from the building. We were keeping them in the building even if they had violated a norm or a rule. But I would say even at moment, I still struggled with seeing them for who they were and all that information I had about anti-racist work went away.

Jessica Hamman: Can you you paint us a quick picture of one student that pops out for you that you can put this to a face for us?

Lacy Robinson: Yeah. So it's my student that I talk about who of course I changed his name that I had my first year, his name was Dominic. And prior to the building opening, Dominic was one of the students listed on this list that I got of just being this notorious student. He was



repeating eighth grade for the second time. He had broken a teacher's arm the year before. He was just touted as just being this terrorist of the building and they were bringing him back for the next year. And so the first day of school, I built my entrance how the kids were entering school based off of how I wanted to handle Dominic. I made all the kids line up outside, uniforms on, I had my entire leadership team and my staff stand at the door. It was like prison.

Lacy Robinson: They looked over all the students, made sure the uniforms were on, looked them in their eyes, shook their hand. You're not going to cause us any trouble. So I'm standing there next to my AP and up walks this lanky. He was just so skinny and he could barely look at me. His eyes kept looking down. He looked really shy and had on this huge belt buckle and we shook his hand and I said, "What's your name?" And he said, "I'm Dominic." And I was like, no, you can't be Dominic. And I shook his hand and I said, "Dominic, you're going to have a good year." And he's like, "Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am." I would make him come to my office every day because I was going to stay on top of Dominic. We would have lunch. We would actually have this intellectual conversation about what he wanted to do and how he wanted to join the armed forces.

Lacy Robinson: And he liked to jump off of buildings because he wasn't afraid of Heights and I got to know him. We had all gender classes. We had switched that around, all boys, all girls and he flew, turned out he loved ELA. He loved social studies. He loved science. He was adventurous. And I looked up one day and I hadn't seen him for a couple days and I called and his uncle answered the phone. He said Dominic's been sick and we're not sure what's going on. A couple



days go by, I made up my mind I was going to go to this house and I'm standing in the building one morning and I'm watching this man carry what I thought was a toddler into the building and the closer he got I recognized it was Dominic. He had lost so much weight he looked like a toddler. And in this very weak voice, he said, "Ms. Robinson, I came to get my homework."

Lacy Robinson: So turns out Dominic had a brain tumor. All those years before when he was called disturbances in the building, it was because of the brain tumor. When he broke the teacher's arm, he was in a massive migraine spiral because the tumor was growing and he was trying to get out of the classroom to go to the bathroom and she put her arm up. The surgeons told us, they said this could have been operable. And it was simply because the parents were like, "We didn't have health insurance. We didn't know we could take him to the doctor." Literally not having enough information and not having health insurance killed this young man. I had a co-principal at the time, we helped pay for the funeral and I helped give the eulogy.

Lacy Robinson: Dominic taught me a really hard lesson that all those years I spent learning about anti-racist work, that if I wasn't careful, if I wasn't mindful, I would slip back into that system and cause the same conditions that quite frankly killed him. I carry him with me pretty much everywhere I go. I have a lot of guilt because he represents the moment where I had it with me all the time and I didn't use it. And so that's part of my, and I would say our call at Unbound Ed is that we work diligently at naming what I call the thing the thing, talking about systemic racism, pointing out how if your lens aren't acute, if you don't have your anti-racist, anti-biased lens on, you literally will



regenerate segregation, systematic racism in your instruction, just in your instructional moves, white, black, it doesn't matter. We all inhale the smog and we will exhale it back into the environment if we're not careful.

Jessica Hamman: I first heard about your work through YouTube video actually that where you're talking about the anti-literacy law of the 1700s and 1800s. And if I can, I just want to play a very quick clip of a keynote speech that you gave where you were talking about that.

Lacy Robinson: Sure.

Lacy Robinson: 1847, Missouri prohibited teaching blacks to read or to write. Yes, this is history but I'm here to tell you that this history has a legacy and this legacy has legs and those legs walk into your school and they predict your practices and your policies and your beliefs around building literacy for children of color.

Jessica Hamman: That is very moving and so important, the foundation of America's education system is rooted in racist policies that build upon what we have now and we don't see that. We can't change it. If we're not aware of it, we can't do anything about it. So can you tell us about what Unbound Ed is doing to support teachers in growing their awareness and what teachers can do to then become change agents?



Lacy Robinson: Yeah. Well I say for first and foremost, we are committed to really building this collective community. The societal view of what an educator is in the United States has got to greatly change. We don't treat educators as who they truly are. They are practitioners who are in the business of thinking and they're in the human development business. And so what we try to do at Unbound Ed is honor our educating community by first and foremost gathering them, which is where our standards Institute, where you will find now over 1,000, couple of thousand educators twice a year come together. We sit for five days and we make our brain sweat around our intersection work. And this is where aligned curriculum, content, pedagogy and equity all merged together. And we say equity with a biggie.

Lacy Robinson: We don't mean just using equity sticks to call everyone's name. It's not heroes and holidays, it is recognizing how systematic racist, policies, practices, procedures and mindsets can actually predicate what we do in those discretionary moments. What lessons we offer up for students of color, the levels of possibilities that rise and fall with our own predicated theories and assumptions about students of color or marginalized students. And so we bring all that together and we ask folks to study that in ELA, in math and in leadership. And then we try to continue this conversation because we realize five days is not enough. And actually in those five days we can shift their mindset and their heart sets that will eventually start to shift their actions. But we know that five days isn't enough and oftentimes people leave and they're geared up and they're ready to go and they get back to their buildings and guess what? The smog is there.



Lacy Robinson: They know what they should do but if the policies aren't there, if the leadership doesn't have it. And so we started our cohort programs to I would say nurture system leaders along with building leaders. That's the only way you can get into the program is if a district comes or a CMO comes and says, "We have system leaders and building leaders, teachers, APs, coaches, lead teachers along with CAOs, system student superintendents." And they said shoulder to shoulder with us for an entire year and they dive into that intersection. And we asked them in the very beginning, we use people's Institute or racial equity Institute. We sit two days in that undoing racism and how it manifests in our society and our personal lives then we take that undoing racism and we apply it and we deepen their knowledge about the content of ELA and math.

Lacy Robinson: And then we ask them to fold them together and then go back into their buildings and to begin to look at where the manifestation of the systemic racist policies, practice and procedures starts to bubble up. Sometimes it's very obvious, right? Well, we don't have an aligned curriculum. Not every student is getting access to grade level work. We're not prepping our teachers deeply enough. Or sometimes it's not as obvious like othering. So I have bilingual students in my classroom and I don't honor them acquisitioning into a second language. In fact, I try to diminish their home language, thinking that I am increasing them learning standardized English. And so we ask them that when those things pop up as leaders to start to reconfigure those things in their building. And starting what instruction we find levels the playing field for everyone. It forces them into the technical move of eliminating racism.



Lacy Robinson: But we all know that you can't just technically move stuff. You have to move into the adaptive. So our cohort programs, we sit shoulder to shoulder. Now that COVID has happened, of course we can't meet in person but we are on next week. We'll be launching our third virtual summit where we've taken our five days and condensed them down to two days if you can believe it, virtually where we get right to the how, so how do I do this in my classroom?

Jessica Hamman: Do you have an example of an organization or a district you've worked with that has exemplified this change that you could share?

Lacy Robinson: Yeah. I have several. One of the things that pops out my head is D'Iberville. It's a small town that's outside of Baton Rouge. I believe we might have had to take a ferry to get there. And there is a building leader there by the name of Emily Martin who was in our first cohort of SLAs and EI OPs. I remember the look on Emily's face when she first started with us. It was kind of like deer in headlights, not quite sure. And so she had come to Institute, she had come to some of our virtual sessions but now it's time for us to go and walk her building. And we go in and we start observing her class. The system had adopted an aligned curriculum, but without the knowledge or understanding of unpacking the standards, which is one of the things we stand on, they kept saying to us, we adopt this aligned curriculum. We don't understand why we're not seeing results. It doesn't feel like the teachers are really getting at, and in the observation, along with the superintendent, because she invited him along.



Lacy Robinson: Because she started to understand that I have got to Institute some sort of power and get folks lined up. We discovered that the curriculum they had adopted was built out of the anchor standards, and none of the seventh, eighth grade teachers had an opportunity to unpack their grade level standards. So if I'm teaching a lesson and it's based off of the anchor standard, I don't have the very broken down stage that my students should be in right now in seventh grade. There's staircase of complexity that the standard offers. I'm not quite sure where I'm getting them to go. So that was one thing. And then I will say Emily herself, her adaptive, that was a technical right? Because the system actually changed curriculums because of that because of her and her advocacy and acknowledging that. But then I would say Emily after [inaudible 00:41:15] program came back and had started facilitating with us.

Lacy Robinson: And this last winter, she was very distracted. I could tell. I'm like, "Emily, what's going on?" And she said to me, "There's a student they're trying to expel and he's almost done and I am fighting for this African American male not to be expelled. He is almost done with his high school track and I just know that if we expel him, he will continue this generational miseducation and wealth gap." So she fought tooth and nail and she convinced them to keep them and months later she came back to me and she said, "You know Lacy, he graduated. He is a welder now. He got a job that has completely now changed his trajectory of wealth." And she said, "I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't gone through the cohort program."

Jessica Hamman: Wow. Yeah. And that's one, that's just one situation. Thank you for sharing that. With all that's happening right now with COVID



closures, I think we're seeing, or maybe more people are being made aware of the inequities that were deeply embedded in our system to begin with, but with the shake up, people are now seeing it a new. Do you have any thoughts or advice in terms of tackling some of the inequities that are arising out of these COVID closures and how teachers, even parents can move forward in thinking about the inequities before them and changing that?

Lacy Robinson: Well I would say first and foremost what I call the beauty and the ashes of all of this is that we as a nation when we sheltered in place in our communities, didn't even realize that we were gathering as collective communities and we had to rely on one another in a way that we had not done I would say for decades. And so in that collectivism, parents and teachers and leaders had to fold into this relationship where they over-communicated, shared I would say the role of educating their students in a way that we have been wanting and looking for on all sides is particularly parents of color. I want to be informed by my teachers. I want to know how I can help my students and yes, I might work two jobs but that doesn't mean I don't care about my child's educational trajectory.

Lacy Robinson: And from teachers, I want to connect with my parents and I know they're busy and it may seem to me at times that they want to be disassociated from their child's educational track but I need them to partner with me. This forced us to find ways to do that. And so first and foremost I would say call out to folks. It's like, let's hold that to be our true north star. There are systems right now who are grappling with the percentage of students and families who they've had no contact with since this distant learning in COVID crisis and I'm asking them to stop and ask yourselves, how well did you



nurture those relationships? How did you open your schools and your communities? Did you meet them where they are? Is there expectation that they enter your buildings wearing certain things and speaking a certain way and holding themselves or do you literally open up the door and say, come one, come all so we can do this together.

Lacy Robinson: Don't make assumptions about our parents. First of all, don't make assumptions that parents don't care about their kids. I don't know anybody that wakes up every day and says, "I want to try and make my child's life as hard as possible because I don't want them to get ahead or be better than me." And parents are our teachers. We have taken the time out to study what it means to be an educator. So stop trying to turn them into teachers and turn them into co-creators. Give them the tools, give them the, I would say the support so that they can better understand where's my student right now? Where are they supposed to be? Where are they going and how can I nurture that?

Lacy Robinson: And then I think this is a time where we as an education community and we as a society have to come to a reckoning, we have to change our perception of what it means to be a teacher. We're not magicians, we're not some celestial beings. We go out of our way because of the love that we have for our students and learning and community but we need support and resources. And that doesn't always mean, yes, I need laptops and computers and wifi and materials, but I also need to support on continuing to grow. I need to be able to learn more than what I had when I got into this profession and I need to be able to have the right tools and research in theory and conversations on how to meet my students



where they are, academically, culturally. I'm hoping and I'm hearing this now.

Lacy Robinson: We hear lots of systems now saying professional development now more than ever has really started to stick out. We really need to get grounded in it. And as long as we can captivate everyone's attention right now through their computer, through their Zoom, we can continuously give them that professional development that they need. And then I would say, above all things, we have to recognize how systemic racism and bias has played out in our school building and our policies, our practices, and our procedures and how we define what it means to learn in the United States and who gets to learn in the United States. And so I'm hoping that all these conversations that are circulating start to turn into beliefs and actions.

Jessica Hamman: Absolutely. Lacy it is beyond a pleasure to learn from you today and listen to your thoughts on education and inequity so thank you for taking the time out of your very busy schedule.

Lacy Robinson: Thank you Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: What a pleasure.

Lacy Robinson: That was fun. Thank you.



Jessica Hamman: If you'd like to learn more about out Lacy Robinson and the great work she's doing at Unbound Ed, you can visit their website at unbounded.org or follow Lacy Robinson on Twitter at L-A-C-R-O-B or @unboundededu.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our ed leaders in literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to [gleaneducation.com/ed leaders podcast](http://gleaneducation.com/ed-leaders-podcast) and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

