



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 7

Eddie Fergus | Disproportionality in Special Education

Eddie Fergus (00:00):

I hear often from practitioners when they are recommending kids for supports, right? They see it from the vantage point of, you know, well I can't do very much with this kid. I can't do any more. Somebody else has got to help this kid. Let's just give him some extra support. Right. And they're coming from a place of like, I can't do any better. So let's just hand them over to somebody. Right. And the concern that we have to, and the research has painted, is what is used in the imagination of that practitioner to make that determination, right? What are the anchors or the hallmarks that they're using to kind of, sort of frame that?

Tim Villegas (00:46):

Hello and welcome to season eight, episode seven of the Think Inclusive Podcast presented by MCIE. I'm your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders and inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do go to thinkinclusive.us, the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Tim Villegas (01:28):

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Tim Villegas (01:57):

So today we talk with Dr. Eddie Fergus of Temple University. We discuss the disproportionate number of students of color being identified in special education and what we can do about it. We review how restorative practices might be used in inclusive schools and how the biggest barrier to inclusion might be who we think can teach students with disabilities. Be prepared to unpack those shopping carts of our minds. Stick around, after the break, our interview with Dr. Eddie Fergus.

Tim Villegas (02:42):

Inclusive education is hard work. And for schools and districts that want to be more inclusive, but don't know where to start, it can seem impossible. MCIE can help. We've been partnering with educational systems across the United States in the world for three decades, and know how to build systemic inclusive school practices, transform educational services, increase the rate of placement of learners with disabilities in general education, reduce removals and suspensions, and improve outcomes for all

students across all school settings. To schedule a free initial consultation and find out how we can help contact us at mcie@mcie.org or visit our website mcie.org.

Tim Villegas (03:37):

Alright today on the podcast we would like to welcome Dr. Eddie Fergus, who is an associate professor of urban education and policy at Temple University. Eddie is a former high school teacher, program evaluator, and community school program director. His current work is on the intersection of educational policy and outcomes with a specific focus on black and Latino boys, academic and social engagement outcomes, disproportionality in special education, and suspensions and school climate conditions. Dr. Fergus, thank you for being on the Think Inclusive podcast.

Eddie Fergus (04:36):

Thank you so much. Thank you for the invite. I'm excited by this.

Tim Villegas (04:40):

We were really excited to have you on because you know, disproportionality is a complicated topic and I certainly haven't researched it for a decade, you know, for over a decade or decades. I'm not sure how long you've been doing it. But when I asked our staff at MCIE, "Who can we talk to about disproportionality?" They were like, "Ooh, Eddie Fergus at Temple." And so I said, okay, well, we'll reach out. And you were so kind to come on and talk. So our listeners are mostly educators, but we have parents and some disabled advocates who listen and they may not know the ins and outs of disproportionality or the term. So I'd really love if you would start us out with, you know, how would you describe this term disproportionality?

Eddie Fergus (05:36):

That's great. I mean, I appreciate it. Thank you. You know I love the, the audience that you have such a great diversity of folks that participate. And I think you're right, you know, we've got to start first, by kind of contextualizing the terminology, you know. At its core, just in terms of the language, disproportionality is really trying to articulate this idea that there is a absence of a proportional representation of a group, right? So like if you have X percent of a group, let's say you're 10% of a particular population, let's say 10% is Latinx. Then you want to, if you're going to look at a particular area, you know, let's say housing or whatever you want to, for there to be a proportional representation that 10% of Latinx families I'd say have an opportunity to get good housing, you know. And so disproportionality in particular how it's been framed in, in specifically around special education and suspension is we want to understand and want to make sure that there is a proportional representations of kids in these different types of practices.

Eddie Fergus (06:42):

And so when we're identifying disproportionality is particularly in special ed suspension, it's, we are paying attention to where we are seeing an overrepresentation, right? An over proportional representation of a group and where we're seeing an under representation of a group, right? So if we're, you know, if a particular population let's say, you know, black student population is, you know, around 16-17% of the enrollment across the country, then we should see a proportional representation of them in special education, around 16 to 17%, you know, presuming that all things being equal, right. That we all have an equal opportunity and also of equal opportunity in terms of practices that were that, that are available to us. And also the nature to which, you know, disabilities are not bound to a particular group,

but rather it is everyone has is differently abled. And there's nothing specific to the, the genetic disposition of a group that you're going to see a preponderance of these patterns, you know? So so that's what disproportionality is really sort of at its core, really trying to articulate and framing for us.

Tim Villegas (07:58):

That's interesting that you talk about proportions because in our work in inclusive education there's this idea of natural proportions. So I'm not sure if, if that term has come across your literature, the way that you think about in classrooms, something that advocates are trying for is in a school that has 10% of you know, students with disability or a community, right, of students with disabilities that are around 10%. We wouldn't want an over-representation of students with disabilities in one particular classroom. So for instance, you have, you know, self-contained special education classrooms where a hundred percent of students have disabilities or IEPs, and then you have quote, unquote "inclusion classrooms" where there are about 50% of those students have an identified disability. And so one of the, one of the things that I'm really excited to talk to you about is how to think about the intersection between you know, disproportionality of, you know black and Brown students, but also disabled students. And you know, why, why has it been that way? And is there anything that we can do to fix it?

Eddie Fergus (09:32):

Right. Right. Exactly. Well, I think what's interesting around this this area of focus is and the research really has been so diverse and really sort of weighing this out is that there's a couple of intersecting realities that are happening at the same time. One is that there is a dynamic of how we have historically imagined what it means for an individual to be differently abled, right? And what are the surrounding conditions to which we perceive that difference in ability has emerged from and where do we place them? You know, so there is a way, so there's a it's a dynamic of bias that lives within that facet of what's happening. There's also the, the facet of bias that's also surrounding race, ethnicity, language, gender that is also at play, right. In particular, if we think about the ways in which we consider amongst particular racial and ethnic groups, you know, there's a long history in the U.S. And I should say globally of, of this eugenics argument, right?

Eddie Fergus (10:46):

This notion that there's something about particular groups that makes them predisposed to lower cognitive abilities, right? And so, so you have this sort of element of sort of racialization bias that exists among racial and ethnic groups. You see the same thing around language ability, and you sort of coupled those things together, right? So this bias around ability, it's really abled and as well as racism and ethnocentrism and ways in which we sort of codified gender, that they, it's almost like this sort of perfect storm in particularly around disproportionality and disabilities is that it's, it becomes yet a space in which we are we've developed sort of further ways in which we kind of connect this, this, this expectation, this idea that that part of sort the, the inability or the lack of cognitive abilities that live within particular racial, ethnic groups is, you know, is further supported by our bias about ability levels and where that comes from.

Eddie Fergus (11:56):

And in particularly that sort of that question of like, where did this come from? And we're in some instances we are not just in very limited sets of research that, you know, that has done some of this, but also I think in terms of people's sort of day-to-day lives that they make these connections regarding this idea that this disability must be connected to something, right. This must be, I mean, I keep seeing the

black boys and in self-contained classrooms where I see these Latinx kids, so there's gotta be something about the population, right. And whether folks have you know, a scientific background to justify to explain that, it's something that they have generated from their own sort of lived experience of continuously seeing it, that they start making this marriage, this braiding together of these ideas. And so, so what what's, you know, what we have to contend with in this issue of disproportionality, particularly around special education, is the need to both dismantle our bias about being differently abled and our bias about race, ethnicity, gender, language ability.

Tim Villegas (13:07):

I wonder if you could speak to this idea of the lens at which we view these differences, right. Because what we are consistently seeing is the conversations around equity, specifically, racial equity are so, are so connected to the conversations we've been having in the disability community for as long as, you know, we've been doing this work. But what has not been present as far as I can tell, is those communities working together to dismantle those biases. And I'm hopeful that conversations like this and future ones can connect the dots between, between that, because what I'm hearing you saying is we already have these preconceived notions about race, you know, and we already have these preconceived notions about disability. And we're used to framing it in a way that says, there's something wrong with, you know, black people, because they score lower on cognitive tests, you know? Or that there's something wrong with disabled people because, you know, and, you know, pick whatever it is. So, is it just a matter of how we're viewing the pr—you know, I'm not, I don't want to even say that it's a problem in how we're viewing these differences. Is it just mindset or is there something else at play?

Eddie Fergus (15:11):

That's a great question. So, you know, so I heard a couple of things. So first on one hand, one of the things that I am always very mindful of as it connects to broader equity, right? So the idea of equity and of itself is you know, we're trying to, I always talk about equity as a terrain, a conceptual terrain that allows us to consider what are the ways in which we are the manifestations of the different isms that exist in our society, racism, sexism, homophobia, Ableism, how they kind of the texture of how to exist in our society and being able to see how it manifests within our social institutions like education, right? So equity provides us this conceptual terrain. It's almost like this, you know, like this box of sand that allows us to really sort of to really sort of muck through and make sense of how these elements of isms, right, end up showing up in our practices.

Eddie Fergus (16:12):

And so within there, you know, in order for us to kind of muck around in that sand, we have to be clear around sort of how the, all these things kind of intersect and how they kind of braid together. So my work around disproportionality in special ed and suspension, and I also include in there gifted AP and honors. And it's consideration also within sort of disabilities is recognizing that this is the sand we get to play in that helps us to practice to understand how these things actually manifest. Right? So for example, in special education, you know, there is this tension that I described earlier in terms of, you know, this bias around differently abled-ness and the bias that we have about racism and gender and what have you, right. Special education is a particular way in which it gets organized to help support itself, right?

Eddie Fergus (17:05):

So some of it it's organized by the mindsets that we're, that gets carried into it, right. It's this idea of, you know, so for example, I hear often from practitioners when they are recommending kids for supports, right. They see it from the vantage point of, you know, well I can't do very much with this kid. I can't do any more. Somebody else has got to help this kid. Let's just give them some extra support. Right. And they're coming from a place of like, I can't do any better. So let's just hand them over to somebody. Right. And the concern that we have to in the research has painted is what is used in the imagination of that practitioner to make that determination, right? What are the anchors or the hallmarks that they're using to kinda sort of frame that? You know, and some of it has to do with sort of how they kind of understand, let's say, on the behavior different, how they may understand in particularized behaviors that kids are demonstrated, you know, practitioners are getting to use.

Eddie Fergus (18:02):

And then I keep your mind. I keep using this analogy, which is that practitioners are coming into the schools with their own shopping carts filled with their lived experiences. And those lived experiences are giving them a sense of how they understand behaviors, how they understand language use, how they understand sort of social interactions, and they're going to use sort of their own sort of those, those things in their shopping carts to kind of make sense when they see a kid behaving a particular way, you know if they're seeing, you know, a kid who abruptly has, or from their vantage point, sees an abrupt sort of outward display of a particular behavior, right. Their bucket of experience, their basket of experience in their shopping cart may draw them to a question of "What's wrong with you versus asking the question, "So tell me what brought you to the behavior?" Right.

Tim Villegas (18:57):

And which is a very different place of departure of experiences that we would, you know, an individual may have. And so part of what we have to get into the, we have to understand is that, yeah, there's this mindset that is filled and it's predicated based on the shopping carts of lived experiences, that individuals are the table and the ways in which we have also at times, taking those mindsets to organize the types of practices that we do. Right. You know you know, one of the sort of importance, you know, elements of response to intervention that was included in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA was this language around the, you know, the permission to be able to say, we're not going to we're not going to use a way to fail approach where we provide, you know scientific and and well-resourced supports for our kiddos.

Eddie Fergus (19:58):

And so this is an opportunity, you know, to really sort of disrupt the system that gave permission for the idea of, you know, well, if the kid keeps failing, I'm going to wait around until they're failing enough. And then I'm just going to shepherd them off to another system, right. There, there's an embedded mindset that gave permission for that to be the orientation for how we do this. Right. Versus what's now expected, which I say expected, it's not, though it's been on the books since 2004. It has, I still struggle with how I run into practitioners who are like, wow, did you hear about this new thing called RTI? And I'm like, what? It's been on the books for a long time, you know, but right there, but the fascination is the, that you they're getting, they're having to have a system that has been organized, predicated on particular mindsets.

Eddie Fergus (20:54):

Right. So we have to do that work of and that's why it's sort of the work that I get to do. The applied research work that I get to do is really attentive to dismantling that. Yeah, that there are ways in which our institutions operate that are highly problematic and sustain sort of particular orientations to how we are serving our kids. And we have mindsets that give permission for those practices to stay the way they are. And we have to work on both, both tracks of work, have to be occurring simultaneously, particularly given the fact that around these issues of disproportionality, particularly around race, ethnicity, and language, is that you know, the ways in which we see, you know, one of the things I tell school districts all the time is, you know, you don't really need outward examples of racism, sexism, you know, language, you know ways in which we discriminate against language from the broader society, because we cultivate our own data of bias within our schools.

Eddie Fergus (21:56):

Right? So every time we continue to to see particular groups of kids in our classrooms, right. If we keep seeing boys in most you know, in self-contained classrooms, we're feeding our own bias, right? So we're, it's almost like we have our own sort of information sort of hub that is being added to all of our shopping cards to kind of keep reproducing that same mindset, you know? And so that's why the, there has to be sort of this close attention to the work that we get to do around developing this equity lens has to really be this conceptual terrain where we are going to get to practice to understand how these isms show up in our, our institutions and our practices, because that's the stuff we've got to fix. And, and also, and I will say, but that's the hardest part of the work, right?

Eddie Fergus (22:47):

Because I can, I always say, I always tell districts. I said, I know how to help you reorganize your systems, but it is the mindset side of it that we, that is going to be the long-term work that you're going to have to it's not going to be like, you know, you're just going to do one diversity class and for everybody, a five hour keynote, and you're good. Right. You got to undo the stuff in, right. It's, it's crazy. You got to undo the stuff that's living in people's shopping carts. And people are at times are wedded to those things because it's like they have they've, you know, there's things that they remember from their own childhood. So it's like, well, my parents always told me not to see color. And I, I believed in that and it's, you know, and it's like, so to unpack that and replace that takes work.

Tim Villegas (23:46):

This conversation has blown by. So I want to make sure we get in we get in one of these questions about restorative practices. So how does...? Eddie, if you asked me, "Tim what's restorative practices?" I just know that it's probably a good thing to do, but I couldn't tell you what it is. So how does that nebulous term, because correct me if I'm wrong, I don't know if there is a, this is restorative practices that there may be, or there may not be, and you can tell us, but how does that fit into this equity work in our schools?

Eddie Fergus (24:35):

Right. That's a great question. You know, so, you know, my working understanding of restorative practice and restorative justice, right, is the idea that you know, when we're thinking about sort of sort of transgressions or sort of issues that have emerged between two people, and we have to be cognizant that it's not just a matter of being attentive to the behavior of what happened and disciplining that behavior. Right. And I'm going to put that disciplining aspect and we'll put that to the side for a moment,

but it, there has to be a substantive attention to the idea to recognizing that there is a harm or hurt that has happened in terms of that interaction, right, or whatever it's transpired between those two individuals, that there has to be clarity around understanding what that hurt is about. And beginning the process of repairing that, that hurt that harm, right.

Eddie Fergus (25:33):

And or that relational sort of aspect of what's transpired in a way that the both set of individuals are able to find a means to sort of to continue moving forward. Right. because there's, in some ways, and this is sort of my own sort of working understanding of it, that it can create a level of arrested development when there is an opportunity to really sort of talk through, deal with, contend with what's transpired and finding ways of repairing it. You know, I think about a colleague who was talking to me about how they were doing restorative practices work in a prison system where they would have individuals who had caused harm to a family, right. Where they either, you know, somebody passed, you know, and the ways in which they went through a restorative process of talking with the family members of the individuals, you know, and, and finding their ways of repairing what they could in relation to the harm that transpired.

Eddie Fergus (26:45):

And I, I always think about that because it's such a powerful way in which to kind of connect or, you know, of not allowing sort of this, this idea that we treat this behavior, whatever transpired as something as an event that happened, we need to punish, chastise what happened and not give ourselves an opportunity as human beings to really consider, you know, you know, what is this doing for this relationship that I have with this individual? You know, what are the ways in which we can help repair it to, to help support, and also to minimize the potential of arrested development that may happen for those two individuals. So knowing that, you know, the way in which I, you know, the, the significance of restorative practices within schools is the potential of it reorienting the ways in which we are supporting kids when these misbehaviors do occur, right.

Eddie Fergus (27:46):

Rather than going to a punishment orientation, right. Towards kids. It's like, you know, you know you know, instead of getting fixated on the kid who kicks you in the shin, you know getting fixated on punishing them for kicking you in the shin or solely getting fixated on that and presuming that I'm going to send them to in-school detention, or I'm going to send them to other exclusionary suspension practices. That I also, I asked, you know, so tell me what brought you to that behavior. And as well as, you know, how do we begin repairing what transpire, you know, the person who got kicked, how they experienced it and what it meant for them. But also finding ways in which the individual who did the behavior to have an opportunity to develop a level behavior modification that allows them to express whatever concern they may have had that led to that behavior to showcase it in a different way, you know and, and finding sort of that balance.

Eddie Fergus (28:53):

I think restorative practice has the potential of doing that within the context of schools. But I have to say, I think there has been, and I've heard this from a variety of practitioners around the country that they're worried about restorative practices being instituted in the black and Brown schools, particularly as a way to to contend with specifically black and Brown populations, right. It is a, a strategy to force them into sort of this yeah, into this particular ice box of, you need to get a restorative practice circle

going on in terms of and you know, and they're worried about sort of you know, and it's been interesting cause I, I, I get what they're coming from in terms of the potential of restorative practices being codified as a strategy for black and Brown populations.

Eddie Fergus (29:53):

And, and I'm not clear if that's, you know, if that's the case, but I, I share and I get their concern because I think we have history has taught us the ways in which way things like that have occurred, where, you know, they, they become, you know, like we see it in special education, right? Where particularly particular identification categories have been informally situated in such a way that are, are, are codified for particular groups and others are not right. So we see the differences, you know, who's getting identified around autism and who's not. Right. Who's, who's being identified as an emotional ED identification, emotional disturbance, and who's getting codified as ADHD, right. And what are the criteria that are being used and for whom and how, and that's, that's alarming, you know, and, and so I get the, the, the concern around, you know being mindful of where restorative practices are being implemented.

Tim Villegas (31:02):

Sure. it seems to me that it could be a, a tool that is under the larger umbrella of multi-tiered systems of support, right. And you know, blurring the lines between special and general education to actually just being education, you know? Yeah. This is how we support kids. Doesn't matter if you have an IEP or not an IEP, it's just, this is how you support. So thank you for speaking to that. What do you think is the biggest barrier to inclusive education?

Eddie Fergus (31:49):

You know, so I think on one hand is the fact that we have to keep working on framing it as needed as being inclusive. Right? So the idea that it's you know, we're all differently abled period. Period. You know, and, but the barrier that lives within that is this a presumption that there is something about none of the sort of unique that is specific to particular groups, but also the presumption that there's only certain adults who are going to be able to actually work with that population. Right. And so, so there's so much of our process and of how we do education that continues to feed that differently abled needs to be treated differently abled and thought about, and, and inactive that way. Right. So for example, you know, the fact that in teacher prep programs, you know there isn't as there isn't a level of requirements around taking several classes around special education.

Eddie Fergus (32:59):

Right. It's at times when it, when it is required, it's a one-off course. Right. and at times it, it finds itself to operate more on the legal framing of special education and not in terms of the practice and the methodology. Right. And so cause I'll hear students come out of those courses. I'm like, well, the, I understand the law, but, but can I understand sort of like, how do I need to think about some terms of methodology or how do I, you know, like what does this mean for my pedagogy? You know, like that's where we need to live, you know, so we kind of set that up. So by the time, you know, individuals become teachers and they're in the classrooms and that it creates this sort of, it continues to bifurcation, right. That you're a general ed teacher and you're special ed teacher.

Eddie Fergus (33:45):

And you have this, you know, what I hear from special ed experts all the time, it's that there's a presumption of the magic dust that special educators have and they do something. And all of a sudden kids with who are differently, abled are able to operate. I'm like, and they'll say we don't have anything special. We just got very targeted training that everybody is privy to. Everybody can get it, you know, so, so I think there's, you know, that's an element that I see as, as maintaining sort of this distinction of general ed and special ed is living in two different worlds. And, and, and the idea of the other issue around inclusive education is the degree to which that it is something that takes away from what's happening in school settings. Right. the idea that, you know you know, I remember a school district years ago, that part of a way of getting more inclusive classrooms in the schools in their school districts is that they offered additional dollars to principals if they would add inclusive classrooms in their schools.

Eddie Fergus (34:53):

And I'm like, and I get why they had to do, it's like to really try to push inclusion. Right. But the fact that you had to incentivize it that way, right. It, in of itself sort of continue sort of this this notion around like it's an extra burden or you need to be sort of paid off. I mean, and I know that's not what they were doing, but it just, it, it, it really leaves sort of a continuing bad taste of sort of how we are needing to understand and supporting our kids.

Tim Villegas (35:22):

All right. Fantastic. Well everyone follow Eddie Arcia, Eddie Fergus on Twitter at Eddie Ar—I'm not saying that right. I'm editing that one. [Follow Eddie on Twitter.](#)

Eddie Fergus (35:36):

Yes. There you go.

Tim Villegas (35:38):

All right. Thank you for being on the podcast.

Eddie Fergus (35:41):

Thank you.

Tim Villegas (35:47):

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive Podcast via Apple podcasts, Google play, Spotify, or on the anchor app. And while you're there, give us a review so more people can find us. Have a question or comment? Email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Pamela P, Veronica E, Kathleen T, Mark C, and Sarah C for their continued support of the podcast. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org.

Tim Villegas (36:34):

We will be back in June with two episodes. We'll talk with Wyatt Oroke, 2020 Maryland teacher of the year. And Melissa McCullough, the director of an inclusive public preschool program in Illinois. On the

blog, make sure to check out "Five Ableist Phrases You Need to Stop Using Immediately." And as always, thanks for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember: inclusion always works.

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