

TEACHER REPORTING LABS: EPISODE 2, CREATING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

Mike Conrad [00:00:00] From PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs, this is Teacher Reporting Labs. Where we're— you aren't going to— Oh, hello. This is...

Michael Kaufman [00:00:07] Oh I thought [laughter]

Mike Conrad [00:00:08] Teacher—can we try that again?

Michael Kaufman [00:00:10] I think we need to...

[music]

Mike Conrad [00:00:13] From PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs, this is...

Michael Kaufman & Mike Conrad [00:00:19] Teacher Reporting Labs!

Mike Conrad [00:00:20] where we're—good job—where we're shaking it up by putting educators like us behind the mic to report back on a mix of topics, triumphs, challenges in real talk that we face in the classroom with some great candid conversations.

Michael Kaufman [00:00:33] And this is only our second episode, so welcome. We're hosts. I'm Michael Kaufman.

Mike Conrad [00:00:39] And I am Mike Conrad.

Michael Kaufman [00:00:40] Aka “The Mikes.” Okay. Oh, and we are recording live from Conrad's classroom. This episode is about creating inclusive classroom environments.

Mike Conrad [00:00:52] Yeah. And can we, maybe for a minute, just lose the edu-speak? Yeah, for lack of a better term, let's dumb this down to the point where you are in front of a student. And, how do you make that student feel accepted or engaged?

Michael Kaufman [00:01:04] Sure. I mean, I think that's what's so important is how people outside of the education world still perceive education is: there's a teacher, there's 25 plus students. They talk.

Mike Conrad [00:01:14] Maybe more.

Michael Kaufman [00:01:15] Probably more, and they stand in front of that classroom, and: the entire classroom absorbs this information exactly the same way. And that's just not how it is.

Mike Conrad [00:01:24] They don't. And we all know that. We all know that because we're in those situations every single day.

Michael Kaufman [00:01:30] Every single day. And the thing is, that to create inclusive environments, you know, without getting all speak-y: you just got to connect with kids. It really should just be like, how do I see a kid as an individual? What did they come into the classroom with? What are they going to leave the classroom with? How are they absorbing the information that's important to them, and try to make it relevant so that it is important to them?

Mike Conrad [00:01:52] And I think there's so many times, I mean, how many times do you look at your plans, look at your calendar, look at your semester, and realize, I can't get it all in?

Michael Kaufman [00:02:00] No, no— all the time.

Mike Conrad [00:02:02] And that happened one year where, you know, one of my former principals, I was having a situation where I was really stressed out. I knew I was not going to get to the checkpoint where I needed to be by the end of the semester. So we sat down, we had a conversation about it. I said, I am so far behind on curriculum, and he said, wait, hold up, are you making connections with the kids? And I said, of course I am. He said: the learning will follow, and I've held that close to me ever since. Even if I'm behind, it's okay, because if the kids are connected with me and I'm connecting with them, we're going to get there.

Michael Kaufman [00:02:29] This is all about creating those types of environments. And so instead of just the two of us going back and forth, we've brought in some experts.

Mike Conrad [00:02:35] That's right. We've got Cynthia Booker, and Cynthia is a digital video production teacher, and she's in Cleveland Heights High School. She's also a two time Emmy Award winner for being a reporter, a news anchor. So she kind of knows her stuff. I do. And I also, I have to say on a personal note: I adore Cynthia. Cynthia and I

connected at the Teacher Workshop in D.C. a couple years ago. We would zoom back and forth every couple of months just to catch up. She is an amazing human being.

Michael Kaufman [00:02:58] Absolutely, 100%. And what's so cool about her is she's only in her, you know, in the early stages of her teaching career, and she's just really rocking it. My guest from SNL is Trina Moore. She is the audio video teacher at Rouse High School in Leander, Texas. She is in her 29th year of teaching. Still going strong, still excited about it, gets into the classroom and brings it every single day for her kids in her audio video courses in Texas. So that's pretty exciting. And that experience really shows in this interview.

Mike Conrad [00:03:29] All right, let's dive into the conversation. We'll check back in with you when the bell rings for passing time.

[music]

Cynthia [00:03:38] Hello, Trina.

Trina [00:03:40] Hey, Cynthia. How are you doing? I was really honored to be invited to take part in this conversation because inclusion—well, and I think it was prefaced that, how do you create an inclusive and safe environment for all your students? And so I don't know if we want to jump right into that kind of conversation. But you know, when we talk about demographics, I think it goes beyond the color of our skin or our cultural background, because culture also includes economics, you know, and value systems and belief systems. And when you account for that with your students, I think there are a number of teachers who are really wrestling with, how do you do it?

Cynthia [00:04:23] To me, I think creating an inclusive classroom means making sure that students feel seen and heard. I try to do that from day one, letting them know a little bit about me; things that I did before I became a teacher that I still had to work hard, had to put in the time and the effort, and that I wasn't always—maybe in job roles, I wasn't always, seen or heard or accepted. And so I've had my own journey of naysayers. And so I know what that feels like. And so when I go into the classroom, I just want students to understand that I see you, that I hear you. And if you ever have any concerns, never feel like you can't talk to me about it.

Trina [00:05:08] What interested me —this is my 29th year of teaching...

Cynthia [00:05:12] Oh, congratulations to you. That's great. I'm only in my ninth year, so I'm going to get there sooner or later.

Trina [00:05:20] I've seen some things...

Cynthia I bet

Trina and I, I keep in contact with a lot of my former students, and I've always taught English or theater or AV. But one common thread through all of my students are some of them are in their 40s now. They kept coming back to how they always felt safe in my room, that when they were in my room, they were able to kind of set aside other things that were going on in their lives, and they knew that they were accepted. And honestly, when I started hearing this, I didn't really think that I did anything that different. But it didn't matter what career they were in. They could look back to my room and that's what they were getting from it. And after I started hearing those things, that's when I really started to be a little more conscientious of how I was creating that environment, that it wasn't just something that I organically was creating, it was something that I was consciously creating, which really helped me. What are some other things that you do to help create that space for your students?

Cynthia [00:06:24] Well, when I think about creating an inclusive classroom, one thing that I do every year when school begins is I do an all about me sheet, and I allow the students to tell me their names, tell me what their pronoun preference is. You know, that is something that I did not do until maybe 2 or 3 years ago. You know, just recently. So, I had to be very conscious of that, like, to, to make sure that I do that. I let students tell me what they enjoy. Who's in their family? What's their favorite subject, even what's their favorite artist or their color? What do you want to be when you grow up? All of those things so that they feel like, oh, someone's giving me a voice, and I don't want them to feel like when they fill out that form, that, oh, it's just something that we do at the beginning of the year, or she's going to file it away. No, I actually go back and look at those forms. So I use that information to maybe do something in class, whether it's, musical artists that I'm playing, I see that: oh, okay, they like Bob Marley, or they like whoever, and I'll play music. So that makes them feel like, oh, okay. So I guess what I said did not fall on deaf ears

Trina [00:07:38] Right, right. Like you were mentioning with the pronouns, you know, back in 2005, I wasn't thinking about that. And I think it's a testament to you, Cynthia. And I hope to me, that as things change, or as our cultural norms kind of weave around, that we are flexible and adaptable to that so that as we learn about new subgroups that maybe aren't being seen or heard, that we kind of adjust our rooms to that, too. Piggybacking on what you're saying, that feeling and seeing feeling heard, you know, giving voice is what has always been a part of what I think I've been trying to do, and

what I want to continue to do. And I think that's what really our conversation, why we're here, is because that is what our students are needing the most right now. We can teach content all day long, forwards and backwards. Right. But what they're going to be taking away, you know, when they leave our walls, what are they taking with them? And hopefully the content. But also that feeling that they have value and are important for who they are.

Cynthia [00:08:46] Another thing that I do is, every day I put a positive affirmation on the board. Whenever they walk into the classroom, whatever, you know, if they've had a bad day at home or if it was just, you know, I just don't want to be here today— if... whatever. I try to put something on the board every day so that when they whenever they walk into the classroom, it reminds them that they are enough, that they can do it, that they are a winner. What we do is not just being a teacher. I think we, we take on a parent role. We take on a psychologist role, a social worker. We— I think we do it all. You know, we teach the whole child. It is a very holistic approach.

Trina [00:09:33] And that, and that is at the heart of an inclusive classroom: is every kid is capable of something. Maybe not in the same way, as another student, but certainly I've had kids who are on the spectrum who, maybe don't work as well in groups, but they can do other things. I don't know, they're not challenges anymore. If you look at them as the creative options that they have, that doesn't. Not everyone's going to be the same, and we don't want a room of all the kids being all the same, with all the same skill sets and all the same mindsets— it's much more exciting.

Cynthia [00:10:11] We are all unique, right? We need to appreciate that and nurture that.

Trina [00:010:15] And I think too, when people hear inclusive classroom, or even safe classroom, they think it's, you know, it's touchy feely, and we sing Kumbaya and all that. When we really set expectations, high expectations, really there is work to be done. And, and we know that that is part of what we're doing. But I think you said it so well, we teach the whole child, you know, and if we're providing an education for these kids, it has to encompass all of it. But certainly, I don't like any kid to make the mistake, to think that it's a quote unquote slug class. There are deadlines to be met, expectations. They have to be, you know, professional. They have to go out and meet with people, meet people they don't know, talk to them, interview them, understand the technology that they're using. There's so much involved and encompassed in what we do. So I think it's a mistake for people to think that they have to spend so much time making everyone feel safe, that they can't teach. That it takes away from their teaching, where in fact it enhances. You have to build those relationships with the kids, and by creating a safe,

welcoming classroom that is. That's huge. I'd say the first week or two weeks of school, it's all about setting up my culture. And so we play a lot of team building games. We do a lot of group discussion. We do a lot of really silly sorts of things to get kids out of their comfort zone. That teaches them to trust each other within the room. And the payoff continues throughout the year. And the time spent creating the relationships means you have more time to teach. You have more time to continue, you know, building expectations and allowing kids to blossom and grow and explore their own creativity and their curiosity. It pays off in spades, really.

[school bell rings]

Mike Conrad [00:12:24] All right. So I'm really glad that they keep bringing up this term safe space.

Michael Kaufman [00:12:28] Okay. So what does it mean?

Mike Conrad [00:12:30] I know when I first got into teaching, I thought safe space meant, hey, lockdown situations. You know, making sure that kids were safe from each other physically. And there was a teacher that I work with here at the building. He's still here today. Every time we had a conversation about what is your goal for your classroom? What is a goal for your students? What is something that you're proud of? And he'd always say, safe space. And I'm thinking: really? You're putting that much time into it? Really? And then of course, the more experience I got, the more students I had to deal with, the more I got to know them, the more I understand the differentiation between every single kid in my classroom...I realized to me what safe space really meant.

Michael Kaufman [00:13:04] But how do you create that? I think that's the bigger issue –is because we talk about it and they mention some, they touch on some things. But early in the episode we talked about, we don't teach a classroom, we teach 25 individuals or more. And when we deal with them on their own individual level. So what had happened to me in my first years teaching was I had a student who was auditioning for a role, and I asked her what her name was, and she said, my name is Mareen, but everybody calls me Maureen. I said, well, I see on your form here it says M-A-R-E-E-N. And that really didn't sound like Maureen to me. She goes, yeah, but most people can't pronounce my name. I said, what do you want to be called? She goes, well, my whole family calls me Mareen. I like Maureen, I'm like, great, you're Mareen and I got it. And I think your other teachers and other friends will get it.

Mike Conrad [00:13:52] It just needed to be that conversation. But sometimes I don't know the other kids—are they afraid to come talk to you about it or afraid to come talk to us about it and have that conversation? Yeah, but you obviously had something going with you. You had a rapport. You had a relationship with her. She was feeling welcoming to talk about it with you.

Michael Kaufman [00:14:08] 100%. And that's what you have to do is create that space where kids feel comfortable to, you know, you have to find where they're at and meet them there for a minute, meet them on their street. They don't have to always come to your street. Right?

Mike Conrad [00:14:20] Well, and you want them to feel seen.

Michael Kaufman [00:14:21] Yeah. Yeah. Because so often they're invisible in many of their classes. So it's so important when they do feel seen it, it's special.

Mike Conrad [00:14:29] So as teachers we do get confident. Yeah. Right? And suddenly you're making an assumption and you think that a student is being seen when you're really not seeing them as they want to be seen. Does that make sense?

Michael Kaufman [00:14:44] 100%. We may be meeting them out on the street they think they live on, but.

Mike Conrad [00:14:48] We think that they live on.

Michael Kaufman [00:14:49] Right. But that's not where they live.

Mike Conrad [00:14:51] Right. So let's go back to Cynthia and Trina and hear what they have to say about that.

Trina [00:14:54] So I moved to Texas from Minnesota. Which is a very, very vast cultural divide between the two. So from a small school up in Minnesota to at that time I was teaching in another school in rural Texas. I made big assumptions about attitudes and behaviors. The value system: rock solid, awesome. But it was—I didn't always share the same cultural views, and I think it made me awaken to the fact that I have to let go of all of those assumptions in the room. I think I really changed as a teacher, looking at kids as individuals, because I had to meet them where they were. All kids are my kids, you know, no matter what, what background they come from, what their family life is like, what their belief system is. That was a challenge that put me on a path of being a better teacher, because of that.

Cynthia [00:15:54] I honestly can say that I've made assumptions that students can get work done. It's like, well, you know why? What's, you know, you're goofing off. You're not, you know, and a lot of times it might be something that's going on at home that you just need to talk to students, find out what's up with them, and have good relationships too, with the social workers in the school and partner teachers. So you can maybe find out, like if a student is having a challenge in your class, then it might be possible they might be having a challenge in another class. We do something at my high school called Trusted Adult, where there's a form that goes out and the students will put the teacher's name down that they feel like they feel comfortable speaking with. So students don't get lost in the shuffle. And I can tell you right now at my school, we have so many support networks set up for students that they feel heard and seen, and there's help for them, not just in the classroom, but outside of the classroom.

Trina [00:16:53] I will say a big change from when I first started teaching is the resources. And the availability and the discussions that we have about things that are so important to our students. And I was going to put a plug in for StoryMaker, because if teachers haven't been using StoryMaker, they should start. And if you type in inclusion in the search bar, there's some great, great assignments and lessons that cover it. In fact, there's one in particular that talks about how to have that conversation at the beginning of the year with kids, about creating empathy and creating connection between kids, and how to have difficult conversations. And like this conversation we're having, Cynthia, it feels like we're just kind of scratching the surface of what it could be. I've picked up some good tips from you, and I want to thank you for that. And I've really thoroughly enjoyed this discussion because it is central to why I have been teaching for so long. It's because I care about these kids, and I want them to have a place where they're learning and growing and creating. It's wonderful to meet a kindred spirit.

Cynthia [00:18:04] And I appreciate the conversation, too. And just as you said, kindred spirit, just talking to someone else who can understand, they can relate. I just truly feel the connection.

[music]

Michael Kaufman [00:18:22] You know what? I could listen to Cynthia and Trina all night because they are awesome. And they are awesome human beings.

Mike Conrad [00:18:28] And they have some great ideas and have a lot to say.

Michael Kaufman [00:18:30] They do, they do. And I tell you so do a lot of other teachers from across the country. We actually heard from another Mike...

Mike Conrad [00:18:38] No.

Michael Kaufman [00:18:38] Yeah, true. If you can believe it or not. This guy is Mike Bartoszek from Killeen ISD Career Center in Killeen, Texas.

Mike Conrad [00:18:45] What did Mike have to say?

Michael Kaufman [00:18:46] Well, he said, I don't know any questions, but, you know, could you explore the idea of connections before content? We talked about student and teacher connections, but we didn't really talk about teacher and teacher connections, which I think is why a lot of people are listening right now. They're trying to connect and feel part of a community, which is what SRL absolutely does. Connections are important for teachers to make with other teachers as well.

Mike Conrad [00:19:10] Well, I think so because, because we feel like we're isolated, because we feel like we're on an island. You know, who out there stressed out? Me. Hey, but our hands are raised again.

Michael Kaufman [00:19:17] They are

Mike Conrad [00:19:18] Yeah. So what do we do about that?

Michael Kaufman [00:19:20] I think there's a lot of questions and possibly, hopefully a lot of answers, and maybe we can explore that in another episode

Mike Conrad [00:19:25] And maybe the next one...

Michael Kaufman [00:19:26] Oh, that's a great idea, Mike Conrad.

Mike Conrad [00:19:30] So that's what we're going to do next week. We're going to talk to you about mental health, specifically teacher mental health.

Michael Kaufman [00:19:35] So tune in. Episode three.

Mike Conrad [00:19:38] TRL is produced by SRL's Community Engagement Manager Emily Hope Dobkin, also known as Dobz. It's edited by Evan Gulock with support from lead podcast producer Briget Ganske.

Michael Kaufman [00:19:49] And many thanks to SRL Editorial Director Marie Cusick and Executive Producer Leah Clapman.

[music]

Michael Kaufman [00:19:58] So my students and I were— last, In the last episode, we were talking about music and how you connected with students through music, right? YSo, I was talking to my students about music as well, and they were playing some different kind of funky music for me. And I was like, no, no, no, no, no, let me play this for you. And it was Aerosmith and Run-DMC Walk This way. And I finally looked at my students. You know what I told them? (Here we go)

Michael Kaufman and Mike Conrad [00:20:23] Now, that's a rap.

[laughter]

Mike Conrad [00:20:26] That's so stupid.

[laughter]