

Episode 2: “Is This Antiracist” Transcript

Val Brown:

Welcome. We are so excited to present to you CARE's four-part antiracist educator web series. In order to reach our goal of an antiracist educator in every classroom, we need to be able to talk. So, we invited 16 different educators from around the country to discuss what it means to be an antiracist educator. Our hope is that you will be inspired to have similar conversations in your own communities. We even created discussion guides to help. Let's get started.

Val Brown:

Educators have so many questions about antiracism education, and rightfully so. Today, we're exploring the answers to some of those questions. I appreciate our four guests so much. Let me introduce you to them.

Val Brown:

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera, Director of Equity Inclusion for a K-12 school district in Indiana. Tricia Ebarvia, veteran educator and co-founder of DisruptTexts. Dr. Susan Faircloth, Director of the School of Education at Colorado State University and enrolled member of the Coharie Tribe of North Carolina. Xochitl Garcia, Program Manager for *Science Friday*, a public radio show. And I'm Val Brown, Principal Academic Officer for CARE. We're all set. Let's pop into the conversation now.

Val Brown:

Talking about antiracism, and people always have lots of questions about what it is, right? So let's start with you Dr. Buchanan-Rivera.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

Yes, I think within school systems, you know, we have a tendency, especially within the oppressive structures that exist within schools and have existed historically, to erase the identities of students of color. We perpetuate invisibility, we perpetuate structures that are harmful, while acknowledging and amplifying dominant cultural traits within schools. And so oftentimes, white students are able to see themselves reflected within history, within curriculum. They're able to feel affirmed within their, you know, school environments. They're always getting messages that center their identities, that demonstrate that there's a strong sense of belonging and connection within schools, that does not necessarily mirror the experiences of many marginalized groups and communities of color that may experience racial trauma within schools. And so it's important to, you know, ensure that we are taking the time to validate the experiences of students of color. And oftentimes within the oppressive structures of schools, you know, those experiences tend to be disregarded or dismissed.

Val Brown:

Dr. Faircloth, I saw you doing some- some nodding and affirming there. What are you thinking about?

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

Yeah, I mean, I- I think, uh, Dr. Buchanan-Rivera has- has answered that question really nicely. I think what I would add to it is, um, given the work that I do as a professor of education and the Director of the School of Education,

I'm not only working with aspiring educators, um, and classroom teachers, but also individuals who plan to work in- in higher education or post-secondary education. And I think that one of the things that we constantly encounter is just that basic definition of what does it mean to be antiracist?

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

We had the privilege of having Dr. Nolan Cabrera from the University of Arizona, and he talks a lot in his work about antiracism, about what does it mean to become an antiracist school of education? And one of the things that he said that really stuck with me is that really questioned whether anyone ever gets to that point where they really are solidly antiracist, right?

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And it made me think about, you know, it's a process of becoming antiracist, as- as opposed to, "I'm going to put a sign on myself that says I'm antiracist,"-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... or about the antiracist, because it's an ever-evolving process. But I think one of the things Dr. Buchanan-Rivera said that also struck me was that I'm American Indian. And as an American Indian and as the parent of an American Indian child, my daughter is in the fifth grade. You know, we really grapple with this notion of are we people of color?

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

Uh, are we members of historically marginalized, um, groups? Whe- where do we fit into this whole notion of racism or antiracism? And I think that's an important point because, um, we certainly are a group of people who have experienced historical, um, and historic marginalization, oppression, discrimination, all kinds of isms, but we also have a unique socio-political and historical relationship with the government, um, and with this land. And so for us, I think it becomes even more complicated when we try to unpack what does it mean to be or to become antiracist?

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

Wha- what does that mean for us? Um, does that make sense? I mean, it's-

Val Brown:

It makes a lot of sense. It makes a lot of sense.

Xochitl Garcia:

I was gonna say, um, Dr. Faircloth, you said something at the beginning that I thought was so poignant, um, which was that it's a continual process. And I think we know this about good teachers and good educators, is that they continually are developing themselves and continually growing and changing their practice. And so when we talk about what it means to be an antiracist educator, that's part of that definition. Is like take that thing that good educators do, which is continually change, morph, and grow your practice, and add these components of developing a cultural context, developing kind of like your readings or your notions or diving into history. And then also like this establishing, like getting to know your community and your students, right? So if you don't know the intersectionality, if you don't know what's going on behind the surface, you're not ever going to really build a sense of trust with your students, your community. And like that's part of this process of being an antiracist educator. Is not... Is getting to know people and growing yourself and committing to that journey.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

Thank you.

Tricia Ebarvia:

I'll jump in here. Um, when I think about the definition of antiracism, and being an educator and a classroom teacher right now, for the last 20 years. Um, (laughs) I did not think I would spend my 20th year teaching in a pandemic, but here I am (laughs). Um, I think about the barriers to becoming an antiracist educator and I think about, um, that idea of becoming and on your way. And I think the moment you think that you've arrived at this place, you can put a sticker on your door that says, "Antiracist educator here." That- that's a danger, right? Um, and I know that I'm constantly learning to be, to approach this work through a stance of humility. Um, I think that's really incredibly critical for, um, in... for educators in general, I think.

Tricia Ebarvia:

I know many teachers who are wonderful teachers, but who don't feel comfortable sharing or being vulnerable at admitting that they don't know the answer. I gave that up a while ago, but I remember in my earliest years of teaching, you know, if a student asked a question that I didn't know the answer to, it made me feel uncomfortable, and I would, you know, try to become the expert, because I felt like that that was my job and that's what it meant to be professional. Um, so it's only later that I realized, you know, I can actually answer students honestly and say, "You know, I'm not sure." And I think for teachers to be antiracist educators requires a disposition of humility, a disposition of vulnerability, a way of modeling what it means to also be someone who's been socialized in a racist system, and how you can show students the way forward in modeling what that looks like.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

If I can add to that, I mean, I think that one of the things that I've really had to learn as an educational leader, um, and as the Director of the School of Education, is to allow myself to be vulnerable. And I think, as an American Indian woman, a first-generation college graduate, um, being in a- in a- in- in the academic space, which oftentimes feels so foreign to me, that, you know, I've- I've grown accustomed to not allowing myself to be vulnerable, because it becomes a very risky, um, place or space or state of being. And so during the last three years that I've been the Director of the School of Education, I have really had to open up myself, to being vulnerable, to making mistakes, to being able... Um, to allowing myself to make mistakes and to make those mistakes in public-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... and to allow my faculty and staff and students to see that process. Because I think, you know, we just talked about these are learning opportunities. When we're vulnerable as teachers, they're learning opportunities for our students. But I would also argue they're learning opportunities for other faculty and staff, um-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... to see, to see us grappling with these issues, because I think sometimes... Um, and this is not unique to me. But I think that, you know, when I was hired as the Director of the School of Education, I made it very clear about what my stance was around diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. But I also tried to make it clear that I'm all of that and more, right?

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

There's- there's other things that I do. Um, but I think that people automatically assume that because there's a brown woman in a leadership position, she will always get it right when it comes to diversity, equity, inclusion-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... um, to antiracist education. And I make mistakes every day, and I have to own up to those mistakes and try again. And so I really like that notion of- of being real and being vulnerable, taking risk, and allowing ourselves to make mistakes in public, um-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... and using those mistakes as opportunities for others to learn from it. And I don't mean certainly that we should sit in those mistakes, right? Sit and marinate and get comfortable. But I think we can show people this- the course corrections that we make and the process that's entailed in that.

Xochitl Garcia:

I was gonna say I love two things that Dr. Faircloth and Tricia that you mentioned, because I- I love this idea of vulnerability and- and I also just wanna add to that. You talked about this idea of power dynamics in the classroom a little bit. And like, one of the things about being antiracist, especially if you're a white educator (laughs) working with students from marginalized communities, the power dynamics in your classroom have to shift. And students are not vessels. We've talked about this a lot. They're not there to be filled, they have experiences, they have things that... they have explorations, they have journeys to go, and you are a facilitator in that journey.

Xochitl Garcia:

And so really reframing how we approach the power dynamics in our classrooms are really important. And that was a really hard lesson for me as a teacher. So it took me a long time to say, "I don't know." Similar. It took me a long time to realize like, "Well, why am I doing fact-based education instead of generating knowledge?" And- and putting students in a position where they are making a lot of the decisions, they are asking more of the questions, where they're taking you on a journey is a really important change to make in as many ways as you can. You're still going to facilitate the experience but figuring out the ways for them to take some control is, I think, key to this approach and the attitudes that both of you were talking about in educators.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

Yeah. I love the conversation and- and where it's heading, and I do affirm how antiracist work is a process of learning and unlearning. And for teachers, I often share that you cannot engage in culture responsive teaching in absence of antiracist work. And you cannot be a responsive educator and disregard the systems that deplete the joy of students of color. You know, there's work for everyone to do within antiracist work, including people of color. You know, some of us have work to do in terms of decentering the white dominant traits that may have manifested in us due to the systems we have been socialized in of whiteness. You know, there's internal work that I have to do every day as a-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

... Black woman, as an educator, questioning whether I am making decisions and conducting actions that are rooted within blackness or am I catering or centering whiteness, you know, as I move forward within this work. And so I think this is a process that requires all of us to engage in self-examination.

Val Brown:

Something that Dr. Faircloth brought up that I've been thinking about recently, um, was my own settler supremacy, right? And how that impacts my ideas of antiracism, right? So we know that the institution of American slavery was built on stolen land, right? But we often forget, um, or I often forget to think about Indigenous Peoples when I'm talking about antiracism. And so anyone, um, just on the call, what connections are you making between antiracism and anti-colonialism?

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

Well, I can- I can give an example. We adopted our daughter when she was a day old, um, from the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation out of Oklahoma. And when we came here to Colorado, and I think I've shared this- this story before, it was almost like a coming home or a coming full circle for us. Because the land on which my institution is located is as I said earlier, the traditional homelands of not only the Ute and Ute mountain people, but also the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples. And so for us it was a coming home in the sense that we were able to bring our daughter back to the original homelands of her people.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

But each day when I do this- this academic work that I do, and I love, uh, working with future educators, and I love the work that I do, to study the educational conditions of American Indian and Alaska Native and other Indigenous students and try to work to ensure that their educational futures, um, are in sync with what their tribes would want them to be. But when I think about that work that I do, I do it in this very contested space and place on the lands of my daughter's people. And I recognize that I would not be able to do this work that is so near and dear to me, if it were not for the forced removal, relocation, and ultimately, the killing of many of my daughter's people.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And so for me, the- the work that I and many others like me do, is really about more than writing publications or preparing students. It's really about doing more work that is- is in conversation and is in good relations with our people. Right? And so for me, I mean, that's a small way in which I can- can do anti-colonial way- work. I've been asked and others have been asked, "Can we decolonize educational institutions organizations?" And I grapple with that, because I don't know how we can fully decolonize organizations or institutions that were not built for people like me.

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And so I don't know how much I want to engage in decolonizing an institution that was not built to work for me or my people. I- I really wanna think about what are some ways in which we can di- dismantle those institutions right from the inside? And how can we establish or build institutions that are built for us? Now, and I know that work may never be done in my lifetime, but I do believe that there are ways that we can work both inside and outside of the system, not only to decolonize, but also to think about what would it mean to build these institutions, organization systems or structures that really value Indigenous Peoples? That value red, brown, Black, um, and other bodies? Um-

Val Brown:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... and that does not work that just happens in a day, right? That- that's a-

Val Brown:

Right.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

... life, a life's work to do that.

Val Brown:

All right, I wanna build on what Dr. Faircloth said regarding building these spaces where all children can feel a sense of belonging and welcomed and is created for them. And I wanna connect that to the question around why is it important that antiracism is explicitly taught? Why do we need to do that?

Tricia Ebarvia:

I think one of the reasons that it needs to be explicitly taught is because racism is the norm. And when it's not taught or not identified, it will continue to be the norm and unnamed, right? Like I think about how, um, in order to fix a problem, you have to identify it first and you have to study the problem. And you have to unpack it and look at all the ways in which it appears in all facets of like in this case of schools. And so not naming it explicitly and not teaching it explicitly just gives that power of normal, like this is just how systems are supposed to be.

Xochitl Garcia:

It's like, you know, if you are not being antiracist, then you are settled in a world that exists in that system. And you're not working against that in any way. And I think not grounding students in an antiracist education means that we're making that a space that perpetuates and is comfortable, and not one that they're prepared to do differently, or create the institution, or work towards helping and supporting to create institutions like Susan, or like Dr. Faircloth is talking about, right? So like we don't get to that future if we're not pursuing antiracist education today.

Val Brown:

Have any of you or do you all recall having an antiracist teacher?

Xochitl Garcia:

No. Some teachers feel uncomfortable acknowledging that as a part of their practice. And so students who are engaging in classrooms that might be doing antiracist work, might not be aware, and I think they're- that's problematic, right? We should, we should be talking about it more openly if you're engaging with students in that way, um, but we also need to address why those fears exist for educators to work, and not be able to say that they wanna engage in antiracist education or that they just wanna teach their students the truth.

Val Brown:

That brings up a question that many people have about the political nature of antiracist education. So what do we say to educators, to us? Isn't this political? And that real fear, um, about being public as an antiracist educator.

Tricia Ebarvia:

That question or that, um, fear assumes that what we're doing isn't already political. And everything that we do as teachers is inherently political. When people say that let's not get political or we can, I think it's a refusal to see the ways in which school systems have already been rou- have already been normed in political systems and ideologies. Like there hasn't been a neutral in public schools. The- the first blueprint for public schools, some of the first blueprints were, you know, the, um, the residential schools by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and whose sole purpose and express purpose was to assimilate the Native population. And that's the legacy of public schooling in the United States that we are still continuing to enact. So the question becomes, what will we then stand for? Is the question. And how can we build a system around what we can stand for?

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

I would agree with that and- and I appreciate you so much bringing up the- the point of, you know, the history of Indian education. And I agree that I think everything we do in education is inherently political. If you go back to the very start of public education for American Indian children and youth, and you think about the work of Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, and the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, uh, his motto was, "Kill the Indian, save the man." And that was the federal Indian education policy that permeated the education of American Indian and to some extent, um, Alaska Native students from the late 1800s into the 1900s. Um, and more than 100 years later, we're still recovering, right? And healing from the vestiges of that policy and that practice. And so I think you- you can go no further than that to see, um, that it's a political act.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

I agree with the sentiment saying education at its core is political. You know, the choice to be neutral is political, and what is taught is typically shaped by social, political and historical context. And I often unpack that statement more too. You know, is the person who is posing that question, truly asking you whether or not it's political, or are they trained to ask that question as a means to opt out of a critical conversation about race? And usually, that comes up, "You know, I don't want to have the conversation because of fear, because of backlash from particular

communities if I begin to embark upon the antiracist journey within my classroom." And so I think a part of that is also helping people to understand the importance of courage over comfort, and making sure that, you know, we're working on leaning into our values and speaking our truth about what has happened historically within our country that has led to these oppressive structures, and helping our students to combat it and be a part of the change. And that cannot happen if we avoid those critical conversations about race and if we avoid developing a critical consciousness within our students to navigate these conversations and discussions within the classroom environment. And so I often feel like that question is a ploy to opt out of a race-based dialogue.

Val Brown:

Another question that often comes up is, you know, if my students are all one race, right? How important is this conversation? Or how do we even engage in this conversation? And so what does it look like when you do have racially isolated communities and you're having conversations about antiracism?

Xochitl Garcia:

I mean, I would just like say like they're not removed from the historical context of the place where they live. Right? So that's- that's a big piece of it. Is that, um, even though they may currently be racially isolated, there's a lot of history behind the creation of that community, there's a lot of history behind, like, where that land used to lie and who used to live on it. And so even when we live in these areas that might seem monolithic, the history of that area is not. And we also are preparing our students to leave us (laughs) and- and hopefully go out in the world and do this work or change minds or be future leaders. And so it is important, whatever the context that they have a grounding in this type of education.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

I think about my own daughter. You know, we've moved her around the country and she's never been in a school where there have been more than two American Indian students, um, in her entire five or six years of schooling, which is sad in some ways that she's not had that experience. But I recall when we were in, um, elementary school, she was in first grade. And the one time of the year that we talk about American Indians tends to be around Thanksgiving in the month of November. And so the children were going to dress up and pretend to be Indians, uh, with brown paper bags and- and paper feathers.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And we talked to the school principal about it, and her response to us was, "Well, your daughter can just stay home on the day that we're doing those activities and opt out of it." And I had to explain to her and my husband had to explain to her, "No, that's not an acceptable response. And it's not just about our daughter, but it's about the lessons that all the other students are learning about what it means to be American Indian, the misrepresentation. And so no, it's not acceptable just to opt her out of that, and how do we explain to her why she can't go to school? Has she been punished? has she done something wrong?"

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And so I do think for me, it's critically important that those, um, uh, that students and teachers from other groups, you know, white teachers, white students, white parents, learn these lessons because they're going to be interacting with us. And the lessons that they learned in the classroom are gonna be carried on into their lives outside of the classroom. And so I want all teachers to be antiracist or to work on becoming antiracist. I want all students and all parents, regardless of what your race is or your ethnic background, um, to work on becoming antiracist.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

And I think it's a real cop-out to say, "Well, we don't have a student of color in our classroom. So we don't have to pay attention to this." Or, "You can keep your child at home." No, my child has a right to be in that classroom and a

right to be educated in a way that acknowledges and respects and values who she is as a Native person, as a brown person, as a Black person, as a red person, and opting her out of that is not an option.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

I will add to that. You know, our liberation is tied together, you know, we're all connected. And oftentimes, there's this myth that antiracist work only benefits people of color. And therefore, I often pose the question, you know, should we lift up this work within predominately white spaces? You know, as someone who has served as a DEI officer within a predominately white school district, and someone who's just had experience in general, you know, within predominately white school settings as a student. And what I share in those moments, is that the disruption of power dynamics that produce unequal outcomes is not a burden that should solely be carried and shouldered by people of color. You know, white people also have to be co-conspirators in this work and that cannot happen if conversations about race, power, and privilege are avoided in white spaces.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

And white children need to know the truth about histories so they don't construct their identities based on lies and form racist ideologies from the tropes and the stereotypes that are prevalent in a country that has such a strong disregard for the lives of communities of color, and also a country that has yet to reckon with the systemic nature of racism. And we know that once these ideologies, you know, develop within students, they act upon it. And so we do have to have these critical conversations. This work is for everyone and no one should be shielded, you know, from these conversations.

Tricia Ebarvia:

I'm thinking about, um, Charlottesville a few years ago, and I remember seeing the images of the young white men who were, um, carrying their torches. And that was a lack of critical consciousness developed in schools. And I think about you can, you can think about how those kids sitting in our classrooms now will go on to be policymakers, but they don't also have to be people who go out and go out to a place like Charlottesville, right? They can also be the people who become media executives, they become people who, um, are business people who make policies in their stores. They're people who go on to education and gate keep, right? So in every aspect of our society, our kids are going to move into these systems and structures. And they can be there and have a racially literate and critical consciousness understanding and be able to identify where systems are inequitable, and then change those systems. Or they can continue to perpetuate what is existing there.

Val Brown:

Thank you all. Um, we're close to wrapping but I wanna make sure that we have an opportunity to say anything that you all just really wanted to say that I didn't ask a question about. What I am leaving with and what I hope others leave with and watching is that there are, you know... There's lots of things that we're still grappling with as educators. Our own response, um, our own learning, it is constant, it is changing. We are constantly trying to get better. And- and oftentimes, I think people want checkboxes but that's not (laughs) how this works.

Dr. Susan Faircloth:

I really want to- to underscore the importance of those partnerships between schools and classroom teachers and educators and parents and communities and universities and col- and colleges, because I don't that this work should be done or can be done in isolation. But we really have to step up our game and interrogate the way in which we're preparing and supporting educators.

Tricia Ebarvia:

This is gonna seem very obvious, but there was a moment where I was doing a lot of this... I felt like doing a lot of this antiracist work as a teacher. And then I thought, "What am I doing in my home with my own children? What kind of conversations am I having with my own kids? How am, how am I showing up as a parent in this

community?" And so I think a lot about myself and I would say to educators to think about the multiple roles and spaces you occupy as individuals and as members of communities, plural, and how can you move in those spaces in ways that move the system and disrupt it even a little bit so it tips towards equity and it tips towards antiracism.

Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera:

I think it's important to reiterate that this work is not an add-on. You know it should be a part of the culture that we are creating in efforts to make an identity of our main space. And this work is for everyone. You know, we all have work to do, we all have self-work to do, and it needs to be coupled with the system's work, you know, where we are looking at the structures that need to be dismantled. And as a mother to a Black daughter, of Black Latinx daughter, you know, I cannot have her see a world where liberation doesn't exist for her. And so this work is imperative because lives depend on it.

Xochitl Garcia:

I just wanted to add that it's not... It may sound intimidating, as an educator, all of this. Um, and, um, it is about that journey that everyone discussed and it's- it's about this idea of like, what's the step you're gonna take next? What's the thing you're gonna do next? And maybe it's like incorporating a more, um, like discourse structure that positions students differently. Maybe it's that you're placing texts in your classroom. Maybe it's that you're connecting outside the community. So just like what is your next step, I think is a good frame of mind if you are an educator and you are in your classroom and you're thinking about how to do this.

Xochitl Garcia:

And another good place, and Val, I know you've talked about this a lot, is finding community and other educators who can sort of support you in thinking about the work. Um, so just thinking about like, what's your next step, um, forward, and what's your journey for growth going forward?

Val Brown:

I wanna thank today's guests for their brilliance and their honesty. As they shared, becoming an antiracist educator will require ongoing self-reflection and explicit learning opportunities for our students. We can do it. Thanks for joining us.