OCALI | Podcast – Episode 19

Advancing Equitable Outcomes Through the Lens of Social Justice

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SIMON BUEHRER: Welcome to Rewind, the Inspiring Change podcast series featuring conversations and connections from OCALICON, the premier autism and disabilities conference. Each year OCALICON brings together a cross-section of leaders, educators, service providers, self advocates, and many others, for a multifaceted approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities across the lifespan.

Rewind is the audio showcase of some of OCALICON's best moments. The speakers, sessions, and stories that make it all happen. I'm Simon Buehrer.

DR. CHARLES BARRETT: A lot of posting was going on about anti-racism several months ago, June and July. Statements by organizations and all that's good and there's a place for that. But that was the easy part, in some ways, was recognizing that race or racism is a problem in this country. The hard part is actually doing something about it.

SIMON BUEHRER: Dr. Charles Barrett is a nationally-certified school psychologist, as well as a writer, musician, and teacher from Northern Virginia. He's a passionate educator, committed to meeting people where they are, and understanding, serving, and supporting the individual needs of children and families. And that starts with learning who they are.

DR. CHARLES BARRETT: Do you know my name? When I get that question, I try to say students' names when I'm in classrooms or in the hallways. And also say them in the ways that they say them or their families say them. It shows respect for who they are.

So when I think kids ask me, "do you know my name?" It's, "do you see me as an individual?" Do you see me as my own person? Do you see me as a unique person? So all students, regardless of how old they are, they are unique and they want to be seen as such.

SIMON BUEHRER: As stated on his website, Dr. Barrett's work is anchored by a focus on justice and equity, which represents his unwavering commitment to advocating for populations that have been marginalized by systemic oppression. At OCALICON, he presented a session entitled, "Social Justice: Advancing Equitable Outcomes for all Students Through Practice and Policy."

In his session, Dr. Barrett helps define and describe the framework of social justice, including why it's important and how we do it. And even though he's a school psychologist with a lot of stories and examples from the world of education, this conversation and these connections are an important part of each of our communities and our society as a whole. Here's Dr. Charles Barrett.

DR. CHARLES BARRETT: So here's our connection. First, how are you feeling? I know we're living in challenging times with education, with schooling, COVID-19, distance learning, whatever your role as a parent, as a teacher, administrator, service provider, we've all probably felt all of these things at some point in the last seven months since March.

So I certainly want to normalize however you're feeling, it's OK. We are going to get through this time together. Challenging times, but we will make it to the other side. So I just want to encourage you with that and also maybe bring some levity to the moment.

So today, a couple of things I want to leave with you. I want you to leave encouraged. I want you to feel good about the session and what you're doing as an educator or advocate for children. But also, I want to motivate, inspire you to challenge the system. Challenge practices that may not be in the best interest of young people, of students, of children.

So leave encouraged, leave inspired, motivated, but certainly, also leave equipped. Hopefully, something that I share will give you some ideas about how you could challenge practices systemically that may not be promoting positive outcomes for young people.

Here's our content. I'll start with, basically, what is social justice? What does it mean for education, for educators? Why is it important to promote equitable outcomes for students? And then how do we do that? How do we really infuse these socially just practices into school-based services to again, promote those equitable or more positive outcomes for young people?

So what is it? Why is it important? And then, how can we do it? So social justice is-- I'm going to start with a couple of things. First, it's not a fad or a buzzword. I think we hear a lot about social justice. We hear a lot about this term. Some years ago, diversity was a buzzword or inclusion was a buzzword.

But now we hear a lot about social justice. But it really is a way of thinking that informs how we approach our work. It's a process. It's something that we're actively engaged in, as well as a goal, something that we're also working towards. So again, working, promoting, and actively enacting things that we have to do, think differently, approach our work differently, in order to achieve equity versus something else. So we'll talk about all of these in some way, but I do want to use this definition to anchor a lot of our time spent today.

Social justice is a lens that really informs how we think about students. In many ways, it's a systemic framing. So before we get to-- a difficulty may lie within the child or within the family, we'll look at systems more broadly around them that could be influencing outcomes for them.

Social justice is also not a condiment. It's not ketchup or mayonnaise or pepper or salt that we sprinkle on to something after it's already made or after it's been prepared. But social justice is really an essential ingredient that's baked into the process. So we get into our thinking that informs what we do and how we do it.

It's also engaging, being willing to engage in difficult, sometimes uncomfortable discussions with colleagues or those around us, in order to really uncover areas of practice that may need to be improved upon. So as we talk about different outcomes in our schools or in our communities, are there policies or practices that adults are responsible for that may be, even unintentionally, contributing to these disparate or inequitable outcomes?

We have to talk about it. So I do think social justice is having courage, if you will, to really engage in those discussions, to really uncover areas of improvement. We often hear this word, disproportionality. And it's kind of scary-- the big D-word, sometimes. But more than an outcome, disproportionality is also an opportunity. It's a chance to look at what we're doing that led to that disproportionate outcome or that inequitable outcome.

Whenever there is inequity, there is always an underlying justice implication. In other words, finding how our practice is, again, even unintentionally, through assessment, through intervention, through instruction, whatever it may be. Discipline, policy ... how those things led to that disproportionate outcome, that is our opportunity to change how we practice.

Also, being willing to challenge any personal limitation or shortcoming in order to become more effective. Instead of competent, I'm going to say, responsive. Responsive, to me, is a much more dynamic engagement, dynamic interaction that we're-- it's ongoing learning, ongoing development, ongoing growth, to be more responsive to these. Competence, to me, suggests that, I've taken the class. I watched the webinar, and I get it. I got an A. I passed. And I'm finished in my growth process.

But especially issues around social justice, around race and culture and diversity, we're being responsive. Ever-growing, ever-learning, as we engage with our students and our families. A couple of words I want to share with you, as we get to some implications. Diversity, inclusion, and equity. Words that I think we hear a lot about, but they are far from synonymous.

So diversity is simply difference. It's different people present in a room. So by race, by gender, by ethnicity, by sexual orientation, by age, whatever different dimensions of difference that we have. Different people is diversity. Inclusion is a step further, it's that different people together in a room -- same setting. Does everyone have the opportunity or is everyone invited to make a meaningful contribution?

So does everyone feel included to participate in a meaningful way? Say we have a group project or we're talking about some policy decision. Does everyone have the opportunity to contribute to that discussion in a way that's meaningful to all those who are present? Equity, I think, is the goal. I know it's the goal, should be the goal.

And equity is not only power, but shared power. It's the ability that, when it's time to make a decision, although we've had diverse people giving ideas, hopefully everyone feels included. If the decision making power still rests with a limited few, that may not represent the whole of the group, that's still not equity.

So equity is having all those diverse voices contributing to a decision and sharing the power, sharing the resources that are going to be allocated for various groups. So diversity is a good start. It's necessary, but not sufficient for inclusion or equity. Inclusion is an intentional process. We are not going to stumble upon meaningful inclusion or meaningful participation.

I went to a mosque last year to attend the funeral of a friend's mother. And my first time in a mosque. And although I was around many other black individuals, I certainly felt different, not being from the Islamic faith. But a friend of mine was there and he sat with me. He explained the service to me, what was going on, what was coming next. And it was, hands down, the most powerful display of inclusion I've ever seen. It was the most meaningful, intentional, deliberate act that I could ever have experienced in that setting.

He taught me that if you want people, if we want people to be included, we have to be intentional about that and really be deliberate about what we do to engage them. When we don't include people, when we aren't deliberate about inclusive practices, people disengage. They stop participating. They stop coming to meetings or they stop coming to school events and our families.

And we have to really question why. If people are not engaging in ways that we want them to, we have to wonder, is there something, again, systemically in our practices that may be contributing to such outcomes? And really, be deliberate about addressing those.

Inclusion is best practices for students with disabilities. We want them to be with their non-disabled peers as much as possible. And then reserve more restrictive settings for only those students who require such intensive support. So with IEPs and special education, there's accountability built in. There's training. There's accommodations. There's staff and resources in order to make the learning environment as inclusive as possible.

So I use that to illustrate that, when we have students from minoritized backgrounds, so marginalized groups in our buildings, what systems of accountability can we establish, like IEPs, to ensure that they are included to the greatest extent possible? So just again, some different ways of thinking about these ideas of diversity, of equality, of inclusion, in ways that I think are not academic. So some short stories, I think, can be helpful for your growth and development and understanding of these ideas and concepts.

A kid is a part of school, part of a family, lives in the community, but also in a certain time and place in history. And all of those systems interact to produce a different experience than someone who may not be in those same systems. All of us have these different intersecting identities that lead to a different experience, based on what all of your identities are, how you experience the world and outcomes around you could be very different.

I'll say this now because I may repeat it again, socially just practices lead to equitable outcomes. So how we do our jobs or what we do in our roles as educators, those practices lead to equitable outcomes. So the what and the how could be social justice. And then the result of that, the consequence of that, would be equitable outcomes.

Where people are is never the problem. It's refusing to grow beyond that, that's much more challenging and much more problematic. So meet them where they are. Help them to grow by providing resources. And then also, make yourself available. If you call someone out, even with grace, with kindness, with patience, still be available to help walk them through that process, if they do want to chat further about it.

So again, two examples of language of how to frame when you are challenging the colleagues that you work with or challenging the practices of your colleagues, based on some of their mistakes or missteps. Seek to understand those whom we serve. Who are the people in your school? Who are the families? Who are the students? And what do their respective cultural, political, historical, economic realities suggest about their experience at this time?

Children or adolescents, their exposure to police violence at different levels, either directly through racial profiling or even vicariously through family members, kind of watching police violence unfold in their community, or those they don't know, results in different levels of anxiety, trauma, and other behavioral symptoms of attention deficit, substance abuse, poor school performance, all those things that we see in schools.

So again, going back to that larger framing of systems, what's going on around the child that could be leading to some of these behaviors? But having some awareness also, of what children have been exposed to the last seven months, especially being home, maybe on social media more than other times, around their parents watching the news. George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice in Ohio, some years ago, 12 years old, was killed.

So all of these things, your students are thinking about. They are aware of it. And depending on their identity, it may be more salient to them. So having at least the awareness, the sensitivity of what students are thinking about is going to be very, very significant, especially at this time, distance or in-person learning. This is not an anti-police talk. But it is a reality that students are thinking about. They're exposed to it and we have to be mindful and sensitive to the needs of our communities.

My students are primarily from Central America -- Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. So being aware of what impacts them in the larger system may be different from who your students are. But we all need to be mindful of what's going on with our families beyond school. Whenever there's inequity, and that could be different things based on your respective system or school, there is always an underlying justice implication.

There's always something that led to that inequity, that disproportionality, that disparate outcome. And when we find that inequity and address it, then we promote positive outcomes for students. So again, socially-just practices lead to equitable outcomes for young people.

Through the lens of social justice, it is worth acknowledging that equity is not a cognitively complex phenomenon. In its simplest terms, equity is providing people with what they need so that they can make progress. If anything is complicated, it is disrupting and dismantling systemic structures that marginalize certain groups. Inequities persist, because in some ways,

we have not fundamentally change how we think, which leads to what we think, and ultimately, what we do for children and families.

So I think we understand the basic premise of equity, from the images, giving every person what they need to be successful or to provide opportunity and access. The hard part is really the mindset shift, changing how we think to really influence what we do. Changing how we think to influence what we think and then what we do day to day.

So interrupting those ineffective policy and practice, challenging our colleagues, that's the hard work that's ongoing. But I do think we understand what to do. We have to make a commitment. So my challenge is, have you been convicted by the necessity of social justice? And then using that conviction to really influence how you think, what you think, and then what you do in thought, word, and action.

A lot of posting was going on about anti-racism several months ago, June, July, statements by organizations. And all that's good and there's a place for that. But that was the easy part, in some ways, was recognizing that race or racism is a problem in this country.

The hard part is actually doing something about it and being committed. So again, I acknowledge that this is real. It's a problem for my students, for my families, and our structures. But what am I going to do about it long term? Rethink what you're doing to redesign what your role can be, to ultimately re-imagine what you can do and accomplish on behalf of students and families.

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SIMON BUEHRER: That was Dr. Charles Barrett, school psychologist, writer, musician, and teacher from Northern Virginia. His website is charlesbarrett.org. And Barrett is spelled B-A-R-R-E-T-T.

You can learn more about his work and doings and follow his blog. It's entitled "To Encourage You," where he discusses and encourages wholeness in every area of your life. You can also check out his publications, which include Today in School Psychology and It's Always About the Children.

And in the background, we have some original music by Dr. Barrett. A track entitled, Adoration. It's also available at charlesbarrett.org.

You can also find him on social media. His Twitter handle is @_charlesbarrett. And you can find him on Instagram, @charlesabarrett. You're listening to OCALICON Rewind, the Inspiring Change podcast featuring conversations and connections from the nation's premier autism and disabilities conference.

You can learn more about OCALICON at our website, ocalicon.org. And for more of our podcasts, you can find us at ocali.org/podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks again for listening to Inspiring Change because the need for change is everywhere. And inspiration can come from anywhere. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.