

## Transcript

00:00:01 Claire

Welcome to the Repair-Ed podcast where we reflect on education and reimagine equitable futures. I'm Claire Neaves, a researcher who worked in education in the city of Bristol in the Southwest of England for over 15 years. In each episode, I'll talk to educators and thinkers about current injustices in our schooling system and their ideas for creating fairer educational futures. This podcast forms part of Repair-Ed: a 5 year project, funded by UKRI to examine educational inequality in Bristol's primary schools.

00:00:34 Claire

Welcome to another episode of the Repair-Ed Podcast. Today I'm in London with Curtis Worrell from Class 13, a charity aiming to transform education by putting equity and relationships at the heart of what they do. Curtis do you want to start off by introducing yourself and telling us a bit about Class 13?

00:00:50 Curtis

Yeah, so I'm Curtis.

00:00:54 Curtis

Founder of Class 13, Class 13 is turning 5 today, so we're very excited about to celebrate that a little bit later. My background – I was a youth worker for around 16 years working with young people in schools and prison and housing.

00:01:10 Curtis

And I guess like over that time, like many professionals working with children, young people, we start to see the same - different young people, same challenges and thinking actually, there's gotta be something underlying. So Class 13 was set up to to do that. So we work predominantly with teachers, schools, people, professionals working with children, young people to kind of think about our own practices and think about how our practices might mirror harm and or be yeah, to be to be harmful and thinking about that. Because I think when we if we practise in a way where we don't really pay attention to that and we're not kind of cognizant of that then we're always going to cause more harm if we're not kind of alert to that. And yeah. So that's the kind of work that Class 13 does.

00:01:57 Claire

Brilliant. Thank you. Our project Repair-Ed, focuses on educational inequality in the city of Bristol, and we've seen a lot of deficit ideology in the way that people talk about their own experiences of schooling and the pupils they teach.

00:02:13 Claire

But we can also see how the current curriculum and accountability measures set up teachers to view pupils from marginalised backgrounds in this way. Can you share a little bit about how you challenge those deficit narratives at Class 13?

00:02:25 Curtis

Yeah. So I think like for us deficit ideology is is probably one of the underpinning ideologies that we all kind of ascribe to in so many ways. And I think it's not something that we we we tend to talk about a lot, we talk about like I guess like the outcomes. So we might talk about attainment or we might talk about poverty and we talk about all these, all these other kind of things around it but we really focus on deficit ideology.

00:02:54 Curtis

And I think the really helpful thing about the model of deficit ideology, is that once you see it for yours- like you see it and you understand it, how it impacts your life because it does impact everybody's lives, then you can also see it for for your young people. So for us, it's like building awareness and really showing people that like, you know, like when we are kind of targeting young people, what we're asking a young person to do is we're asking to kind of build be, be more resilient to the harms that they're facing. And then we think we call that success.

00:03:23 Curtis

And yeah, for us, that's that's not. That's not a marker of success that's that's a marker of survival. And I think we we do that so often that we we also have like all these I guess what we would term as successful young people who who are kind of working through the system and they're more resilient to the system.

00:03:42 Curtis

Then we look at them as examples and say, well, if you just work a little bit harder, then everything would be OK, like again, just blaming the the young people. And I think this for, for for us.

00:03:53 Curtis

I think if you look at education like the harms that have that are being caused like to children on free school meals, children racialized as non-white, girls, if you've got an additional need like there's this it basically it's like most young people are going to be harmed in the system.

00:04:14 Curtis

We know that, and yet we continue to perpetuate that. And then we pull young people out occasionally to work with them, one to one, acting like that's going to do something, even though the kind of statistics of that harm have have kind of been...

00:04:29 Curtis

You know, like they've been around for for 50 plus years. It's. Yeah, it's almost like I I don't know. It's frustrating because it's like "we know" and we're like, "hmm just not too sure". Like "we do." Because I think even if you were to speak to any kind of professionals, especially working in education, when they when they get their first intake of year 7s or year 5s or whatever it looks like.

00:04:51 Curtis

They can. They can spot the ones that are not gonna be able to make it as well. So I'm like, "so - you know."

00:04:57 Claire

Yeah, for sure.

00:04:58 Curtis

But yet, you still blame them at the end, like when it's when the young person gets excluded, as they were always gonna get excluded, we're like, "Ohh we get we tried our best" and I'm like, "we didn't" and we we didn't even try our best and we didn't even learn from that. So we're just gonna perpetuate it and we're perpetuating it probably at the same time that we are. Yeah, like talking about that it it all becomes very challenging and I think we also we're just making like rods for our own backs really like.

00:05:25 Curtis

So we could undo that and have an easier kind of engagement with children and young people if we just didn't move in those ways.

00:05:33 Claire

Yeah. And I definitely, so I taught for 15 years and I definitely felt that tension of kind of knowing that what I was doing was not the right thing for yeah, let's be real, most of the students I taught, you know, if you if you asked me to say the ones who kind of did really well within the system.

00:05:52 Claire

You know, it was a handful in each class. So yeah, it was clear it wasn't working, but being complicit in that system and kind of still chasing those accountability measures,

you know, the progress, the achievement, the, the, the attendance, all of those things, it's kind of it's difficult when you're in it, I guess.

00:06:12 Claire

To see a way out, and I think one of the really useful things that Class 13 does is just sort of slow things down for teachers to say to, to be able to reflect. So what sort of things do you do when you work with, with schools and with teachers to get them to be able to really see that deficit ideology?

00:06:33 Curtis

Yeah. So one one of the right really helpful ways that we we do it is we in the very in the very beginning before we start engagement with the the teachers, we we ask them like name like think of a student in your class that is that is displaying challenging behaviour. What does that look like? What would you do and what do we think the underlying causes are and it's like that's really interesting because one, they already know they're going to come and come onto our course, so they're putting their best foot forward.

00:07:00 Curtis

But yet, every time they write something down, it's it's pretty like it is deficit ideology and we don't even like at the beginning of the course. Like we don't look at it because we're like, there's no, there's no benefit for us looking at the beginning, we might as well just look at it at the end, when everyone else does.

00:07:17 Curtis

And then when we get to the end after we've kind of explained what deficit idea of the years we we give a lot of examples of kind of ways that they can find it in different in different people's practices. And then you just give it back to them and be like "what do you think?" and then they're like "oh" and we have like this really like I guess like.

00:07:33 Claire

Wow.

00:07:39 Curtis

Like the thing that we do in our training essentially is like when we asked about these three underlying causes. So, so a really, I guess like a helpful example is that one of the underlying causes a teacher put down a couple of years ago was that the the young persons's mum has a full-time job and therefore the young person can't access like after school activities and and these types of things. But what we get them to do right at the end.

00:08:09 Curtis

Is is to say and is is is to kind of expose the kind of myth that they tell themselves is to flip it and go: “so if so and so’s Mum didn’t work full time. Then everything would be alright?” and they’re like “ah, that’s that sounds horrible.” But I’m like “that’s what you said. Like the underlying problem is that the mum works full time.”

00:08:29 Curtis

Do we want her to work less? Like what’s going on? And then we have to kind of pick apart and go actually what is that? Because there’s young people in the schools whose mums do work part time and they’re still not, everything’s not OK for them. So it’s like, what are we actually going to do? And I think when we think about what we what we can do.

00:08:49 Curtis

I think we...

00:08:51 Curtis

I guess it’s like slightly frustrating for us because.

00:08:54 Curtis

I think you’ve even, you even spoke about it in terms of, like, not knowing where to kind of turn and not knowing what to do. And for us, I’m like, “you go with what you know to be true.” Like we know that like shouting at people is not nice, right? So we probably shouldn’t do that. We know that like isolating people from other people is also not kind. And it’s also like very much linked in, like if we if we saw that in a relationship that would be a red flag, we would stop doing that.

00:09:24 Curtis

We also know which is probably one of the bigger kind of bits that perpetuates this is that we don’t live in a meritocracy, right? So if we don’t live in a meritocracy, that means the grades can’t be the most important thing because they they they matter. But so many other factors are gonna play into them, whether or not a young person is successful in this kind of model of what success looks like. We also know that these other these other things if if, if in other environments would be considered harm.

00:10:00 Curtis

Just go with what we know to be true. So then we’re like, actually, it doesn’t make any sense to to do that in order to in order to kind of to get the young person to get the grades to be able to do this thing, because that’s a lie. This is truth. We can then make our decision and and like, I reckon if you were to speak to any any of my previous like bosses, they would say that like they’ve asked me to do things in the past and I just say no, I think that’s harmful to young people and that for me is like...

00:10:23 Curtis

Where my boss would have asked me to do something, I would have just. I could have just done that

00:10:27 Curtis

Now we're having a conversation about whether or not it's harm or not, which is a helpful conversation to have in that moment, because otherwise we would just keep doing it. And it's just like, actually, if we just slowed down for a moment and I'm saying that's harm, now you've got to convince me that it's not harmful and but in order to convince me it's not harmful, you've gotta accept a little part that it might be.

00:10:48 Curtis

And now we're having a different type of conversation, which is gonna kind of impact his practice. So the impact my practice, it's gonna impact other people's practices because if I if we then choose that like we're not going to do that then then it goes back up the chain to say, well, we don't do that anymore because it's harmful.

00:11:11 Curtis

And now we're having a conversation about the harm that we cause rather than always thinking about the harm that is external to young people or external to us as professionals. It's, I don't know. I think we just do what we know to be true. And we do what we can do rather than keep pointing the fingers at everybody else because everybody is part perpetrator, part part victim. That's just the society in which we live in.

00:11:29 Claire

Yeah, we've been on our project, we've been working with the ideas of Michael Rothberg. So an idea of complex implication. And it's beyond kind of the victim, perpetrator split. And. And I think that's that's really important for sort of teachers to to grapple with, you know, teachers who are complicit in the system. That it isn't. It isn't that straightforward, and I guess what you've just said makes me feel quite hopeful, and I hope teachers listening feel quite hopeful who may be...

00:12:00 Claire

They're embedded in these systems where, you know, they've got a school that runs an isolation room. And like you've said, you know, if someone was isolating someone in a relationship, you'd be like, wow, major red flag. But we do it in schools across the country all the time. Yeah, I bet you there are a lot of teachers listening to this who are like, "yeah, I know sending kids to isolation's wrong. But... my school's behaviour management policy..."

00:12:21 Claire

But just that little bit of power that you've given back to teachers there to say...

00:12:25 Claire

Just say, "well, hang on, I think that's harmful. Can you can you tell me why it's not?" ia huge. Like that's. And I think it's kind of like little micro resistances in the system, isn't it that kind of are gonna add up, but I guess do you... bigger than that, do you work with whole schools on kind of systemic change to...?

00:12:46 Curtis

Yeah. So, so right now what we're doing is working with two schools in Lambeth, Henry Fawcett and Lilian Baylis. We're gonna be working them for four years.

00:12:54 Curtis

And our plan is. So for us we have 4 key principles and they are. So the first one is affirming, so making sure that everybody feels valued just for being a human being, not because they're good at maths or not because they're good at English or they're good at football. That's like, that's fine. But we want to be like "you are valuable because you're a human being and that's it."

00:13:15 Curtis

And then the second one is, is critical thinking. So really supporting young people and adults in that space to think correctly. So like when I'm saying to my boss, "I think that's harmful," that's critical thinking right? Because now we're engaging in something. And then the last one, well not the last one, the the next one is community, so being intentional and building community.

00:13:42 Curtis

So if we're like if we if we think that community is important, then isolating the young person becomes like just illogical, like we we can't do that because we're trying to intentionally build communities. That means that every interaction we have, like whether it's with a a parent, another teacher, a young person, do you know what I mean? Anybody. We're either trying to strengthen the relationship that we have or build or support them to build further relationships then, right, that seems to make sense.

00:14:03 Curtis

And then if we do all of those three things really well, then what we will have is. What we will have is democracy. So then we'll have, like, a real kind of case of democracy because we are listening to people. We are kind of supporting and to kind of build the relationship and be together. So the outcome of that is democracy. And I'm like that for us it feels like the most logical way.

00:14:32 Curtis

And it's like, the the thing we're saying is that we don't...I don't know what the future is gonna look like, but I think when we get there, those four things will be key in order to kind of move us to the next state, the next step and I and also I think.

00:14:45 Curtis

There's, I guess there's two. There's two things on that. Is that like, you can build an environment where young people expect democracy, right? Because at the moment with, with, with you're kind of educating young people in a space of kind of coerced coercion and kind of just these kind of really punitive pressures that when they go to their job, they expect their manager to be dominating and their manager expects to be dominating because that's how power, that's how that's that's how we've seen power being used. We're just like that's what we do. We see it with young people.

00:15:17 Curtis

Like, why are the year elevens pushing year sevens? Hmm.

00:15:21 Curtis

I can pretty much tell you as to why the year elevens are pushing year sevens, because it's the same reason why the the teachers are are not being particularly kind to the TA. It's like it's it's all and why the head teacher is not being do you know mean like all of that is just trickling down and everyone's like "ohh when I get power, this is what I'll do." But the second thing is is like.

00:15:41 Curtis

If you pick any kind of challenge that, like young people are facing. And so if you think about like grooming or gangs or violence or anything like this, it's like.

00:15:52 Curtis

So if a young person felt affirmed in themselves, would it would it would reduce their vulnerability to that if they if they had a community around them who they were in critical conversation with, again, it would reduce their vulnerability to that. So for me, I'm like it just makes sense because the more we take that away we're actually increasing the young people's vulnerability to that. If you're standing in the front of the classroom and you're telling young people that.

00:16:19 Curtis

Like this? Is this like an adult says this, and therefore you have to do it and you can't question that. Then you meet an adult on the street and they say I want you to do this, then you do it. And it's also like, I guess we're talking about education, but I think we can also talk about youth work in that, because in youth work that we do and I speak as a youth worker, like we find out what the young person likes.



00:16:39 Curtis

Then we give the young person what they like, and then we ask them to do something that we don't think they would have done when we first met them. I'm like.

00:16:47 Claire

Sounds pretty coercive, doesn't it? Yeah.

00:16:48 Curtis

It's all there. So like if we were in the critical dialogue with the young person about that, then things could be very different. But we are forever increasing young people's vulnerability to things, and when we do that, we start to think about things like social media and we're like what we need to do is we need to be more controlling about young people with social media. So we should just tighten the net. And what's that gonna do? It's gonna mean young people go underground. They're gonna be more vulnerable to more exploitation, blah blah blah.

00:17:19 Curtis

But if we instil those three, those 4 principles.

00:17:23 Curtis

Then we don't have to be scared of social media because we're scared of social media now. Before, in my day, we were scared of like Eminem's album. Do you know what I mean, we're always scared of something, and if we, how are we going to kind of waylay that fear? The four principles. It's like it's so simple for us. I'm just like, "just do those things..."

00:17:42 Curtis

And do them well and keep trying to do those as best as possible and we will have an outcome that is is better." That's that's gotta be my belief that yeah, it makes sense – it tracks.

00:17:55 Claire

It does, yeah. And it kind of feels like with young people, we're we're doing this, like dual thing of like, "you must be resilient" and like putting all this responsibility onto them to solve all their own problems and you know, to take the responsibility for for failure.

00:18:11 Claire

But then on the other hand, we're kind of saying "you're not responsible enough to engage in this critical dialogue. We're gonna tell you exactly what to do, and you do it. But then when it goes wrong, we're gonna blame you for it."

00:18:25 Curtis

Yeah.

00:18:26 Claire

So it's kind of, you know, it. I think that community and that affirming young people feels really, really empowering. And. And it's it's interesting to hear you talk a little bit about youth work with that kind of critical like reflection...

00:18:34 Curtis

The the thing I would say about youth work as well is that... So when we work, so we work with, we work with a lot of teachers and we work with some youth workers. And when we work with teachers, teachers are used to that critique like they're used to the kind of schools are not doing great and therefore, but youth workers like, and I speak as a youth worker like we think we're the best. Like we like, we think we're better than social workers because young people choose to engage with us.

00:18:46 Claire

Yeah.

00:18:58 Claire

Yeah.

00:18:58 Curtis

We think we're better than teachers because the the relationship is informal. So like when we come to kind of understand like if we think we're the best, we're gonna cause harm because we're just walking through the world like like, do you know, I mean, without a care in the world, but we have to go actually like the harm that we cause is is always gonna be there and like my first lecturer he used to say that like, and he was lecturing on youth work, he would call us like the cuddle police because he was like the we're still saying the same thing. So every all of the services are saying the same thing and saying, do this sort of so teacher says "do this or else," youth worker says, "do this or else." Social worker says "do this or else."

00:19:35 Curtis

Police say "do this or else" but their 'or else' is always consistent whereas like you can you can meet a youth worker on one day and it could be fine. You can meet a teacher on one day it'll be fine. But if you meet a police officer, they're usually quite consistent and I feel like, they're kind of, there's also like a bit with young people or for for some young people who are able to see a see a police officer and kind of go 'this could, this could be' – do you know what I mean? Then they have kind of amber warning that like 'this

could this could potentially be harmful. Let me brace for impact. Let me' – do you know what I mean whereas...

00:20:06 Claire

Yeah.

00:20:07 Curtis

If a young person meets me. They are not. They're not. They're not bracing for impact. They're like 'he seems cool' like, do you know what I mean? And we're engaging with things. We're talking about the things I like. He likes football. We like football, blah blah blah.

00:20:21 Curtis

But I'm like, "do this or else," still. Like so we have to think about our practices in ways and I'll say that like the analogy I use is a lot is like...

00:20:35 Curtis

When we drive, we know that car cars are dangerous, right? And they have the potential to kill someone. They have real potential to kind of be harmful. But you can still enjoy driving, but you just have to keep your eyes peeled and kind of drive with due care and attention. And that's what we have to do with our practice. We can still enjoy our practice. We can still kind of, you know.

00:20:55 Curtis

That, yeah, kind of go and do it and and and be happy with that. But we just have to go. Hmm. Is the light green? Is the, do you know what I mean? Is that person gonna stop? Is that person gonna step into the road?

00:21:06 Curtis

Like is my practice harmful?

00:21:08 Curtis

Yes, no, maybe, but if we're always asking ourselves, 'is it is it harmful?' and we slow our practice down, then we'll then we'll be better for it because the enemy of equity is pace, it's speed. It's always gonna be speed. It's the quicker we move the more inequitable we're going to be. So we just have to slow down. The best way to slow down is to keep asking ourselves, "is this harmful?"

00:21:23 Claire

Yeah.

00:21:29 Curtis

Same with a car, so you don't...

00:21:30 Claire

I feel like I had an almost like this visceral reaction when you said...about pace, because, like having stepped away from working in schools like I used to think that I just wasn't very good at sleeping like I thought, I I don't sleep well. You know, when people be like, how do you sleep? I'd be like ohh rubbish. But you know, I just. I'm not a good sleeper. When I stepped away from the classroom last year I started sleeping through the night.

00:21:52 Curtis

OK.

00:21:53 Claire

And it was just the pace of schools is just so intense, and it is.

00:22:00 Curtis

It's crazy.

00:22:08 Claire

Is there is no time and like you might sit down and have these conversations in September about, you know, potential harm that might be caused. You know, you've got your kind of pastries and your coffee on an INSET day you're sitting there, you're having these really critical conversations and then suddenly you kind of look up and it's June and you've kind of realised. 'Ohh we didn't. We haven't been asking those questions.'

00:22:34 Claire

So how can you like embed that criticality and that reflection in like the sort of everyday cycle of schools when they're trying to work so rapidly?

00:22:43 Curtis

So. So I think going back to the four principles, I think you could use the four principles to observe lessons and like and be asking teachers like, "how was that affirming" like just keep using that language.

00:22:55 Curtis

I think that makes a lot of sense. I think also with behaviour management I think obviously like in schools that we're we're recording that and I think one of the things we're not recording is like, 'how was this interaction harmful to this young person?'

Imagine at the time when we're writing down, 'Oh they did x, they did y'. 'How was my interaction harmful to this young person?'

00:23:15 Curtis

Or 'how did what or where did they learn this behaviour or how, what, how did I teach them this behaviour as well?' It's like a really interesting question because again, it goes back to like they've seen us use power in these particular ways.

00:23:27 Curtis

Are they just replicating the power that that we show? And I think it's always like interesting when I go into schools and they have like a they have a they have they they have, what will they say to me? They'll say that like 'the boys are misogynistic, they're commenting on what girls are wearing'. But they also have a uniform policy which comments on what girls are wearing. So on the same day, the teacher could go: "You roll down your skirt and take off your nails," or your eyelashes or whatever that looks like, and then the boy says something about her dress and then he gets in trouble.

00:23:51 Curtis

And I'm like, that is so confusing. And like if we want to kind of stamp out misogyny and what we'll what we'll do. And it goes back to that victim blaming stuff and kind of pinpoint it. We'll do what we need to do is we just need to work with boys and tell them XYZ. And I'm like, you can tell them whatever you want. But if their lived reality within the rules of your school is misogynistic, then telling them anything doesn't make any sense. And I guess in order to to to answer your question about how do we get to slow down and how do we kind of embed that?

00:24:31 Curtis

We have, we again it goes back to just like being honest like we're we're cramming young people and like young people are like being sick before GCSE exams. And we're like, we all kind of know that GCSE exams, they're important but they're not - it's not do or die. Do you know what I mean? Like, you shouldn't be on the verge of making yourself sick.

00:24:45 Curtis

So, so. And I remember one time my friend asked me if I would go and talk to a group of year elevens about their exams. And not being stressed. And I was like, I can talk to the year sevens, but like, I'm not gonna talk to year 11 because they won't even believe me. They're just like, they believe that, right, they they've kind of been indoctrinated in such a way that that that's it. So I think we have to kind of.

00:25:12 Curtis

We have to kind of put things back in perspective. We say like that humanity is first and then learning is second. But we've we like there's a campaign at the moment, which is like talking about lost learning.

00:25:25 Curtis

I'm like what about the loss of humanity of children, like...

00:25:22 Curtis

I I I can I can like, I can get behind, like a lost learning like I I want young people to kind of access as much learning as possible, but like not at the detriment of them as human beings. Because I think the thing that we also kind of miss is that the young people who are successful in this moment and kind of do all of the right things and they're like the model student.

00:25:53 Curtis

And like, I guess like if your value is tied to how good you are at Maths for instance, like and then you go on and you do like your your A levels in Maths and you go into your your ma- your your degree in Maths and then you might get to a point where you go, "I don't really know if I like Maths." Like "I don't really know who I am because I wasn't able to kind of like like construct my own identity."

00:26:19 Curtis

"My identity was constructed for me because someone once told me I was really good at Maths and I should just pursue that. So that's what I did." So like so then we have lots of people in therapy trying to work out who they are. And I think there's probably like I say that to teachers and they will kind of just like, give me a wry smile because they're like, 'yeah I feel that' and like we all know people who are going through that trying to work out who they are.

00:26:39 Curtis

So if we co-construct young people's identity with them, then we also give ourselves a little bit of a space. So we have to kind of I think in order to actually slow down, we're gonna have to kind of just like acknowledge and admit that like it's important, but it's not the end of the world, like, do you know what I mean? In terms of GCSEs, because that's the thing that gets everyone like "ohh God. Like we have to get these. We like, I really want this kid who's gonna get an 8, I really want them to get a nine."

00:27:05 Curtis

Come on, like.

00:27:03 Curtis

It matters, but it's not. It's not that the like. If they're gonna get an eight, they're gonna get an eight late and they're gonna, they're gonna get an opportunity to do something else in their lives, but if we if we equip them with the with the ability which says, 'you are valuable.' Like, 'you are valuable above and beyond your grades, and you can think correctly and you can kind of galvanise support from elsewhere.' Then if you get an 8, you'll be able to go and talk and get into your get and you know, I mean display that you are kind of a nine, and the last thing I'd say on that as well, which is like kind of tied to it is that just for a moment, imagine that we live in a capitalist society, right? Like the way that we're treating young people is not even beneficial to kind of capitalist endeavours, right? Like because when if you, if you speak to kind of or if you read about what employers are saying about this generation of children, that they can't work together, they can't think critically, they can't engage.

00:28:05 Curtis

So I'm like, what are we even doing it for? Like they're they're not. We're not producing the best workers. We're producing like a group of young people that who are who are, like, like mental health and and well-being is going through the roof.

00:28:19 Curtis

For and, what's the outcome? The outcome is they're not even. They're not even productive workers. I'm like, cool. If that was the aim that we wanted to get to...

00:28:28 Claire

We're not even getting there. Yeah.

00:28:24 Curtis

We don't even getting there. I'm like, we could be better at capitalism, if that's what we really wanted to do.

00:28:28 Curtis

But yeah, for us, I'm just like, it's all very illogical, but once we understand that, then we would slow down. We'd be like, "OK. Yeah, like I I do have a couple of moments to talk to you about, you know what you did at the weekend" or "I do I I do want to hear that question actually, even though it's not on topic, I can - I have time for it."

00:28:52 Curtis

Because that's helpful in terms of affirming the group and kind of thinking about things and all those different things. So yeah, like I think we have to kind of just acknowledge the truth that we already know and then we'll slow down

00:29:04 Claire

Yeah, yeah. And what you're saying reminds me of our last episode. Keziah, who's been a head teacher for a long time, was talking about accountability measures and you know, she said, like "scrap Progress 8 and just, you know, measure me on how well my kids who've left my school are doing at 25 because, you know, these kind of really narrow set of results at the end of year 11 or year 13, you know, they're not it. They're not the be all and end all."

00:29:32 Claire

And and it's about so much more than that and I think, you know, yeah, thinking about pupils it shouldn't be a revolutionary idea that we want to think about pupils as whole human beings and and develop them. And I think you know, if you ask any teacher why they went into teaching, they're not gonna say so that like, you know, "80% of my class made this much progress." They're going to say, "to develop young people", "for the love of my subject," you know all of this kind of stuff is sort of missing a bit. And yeah, I guess so. I read a blog post on the class 13 website that talked about deficit ideology being more than a mindset, being a system, and I think you've talked a lot about the kind of things within the educational systems that are harmful.

00:30:17 Claire

And you know, these accountability measures, pace, the focus on, sort of compliance as behaviour...

00:30:27 Claire

And and last time we spoke you mentioned, I was talking I think about 'closing the gap', you know a phrase that's used a lot in education and you were talking about Ladson Billing's work on educational debts. And I wondered if you wanted to just talk a little about that.

00:30:43 Curtis

Yeah. Like I think that's a really, I think it's a really helpful framing because like we we're we're constantly trying to get young people to catch up. That's that's essentially what it is. But I think when Ladson Billings kind of describes it as a debt, then you kind of you can understand and I think that like the debt that we kind of, that we owe to young people, which we're kind of doing right now, when we think about their parents as well, like the reason why their parents are engaging in school in a in a different way or in a guess, a more challenging way because they're also in debt. So that that is only going to keep like being passed on and what's really interesting about that as well is that.

00:31:18 Curtis

Those parents value education because they didn't have it, so they want to kind of double down on all of that kind of interesting stuff, but it's like it will - it's gonna keep



perpetuating itself, so we have to kind of step back and say, what is it we're trying to achieve with these young people and like, what is it we want for, I guess, like for wider society because I think what we kind of overlook or we overlook what we talk about in the adverts that like teachers have an opportunity to kind of change lives, right? Like they have opportunity to kind of change society. So if we want society to change, we can't teach conformity. It doesn't make any sense. But like going back to the kind of...

00:31:56 Curtis

The the debt that is kind of that is resting on on these shoulders like it's it's it's gonna be there for like a while and we're gonna have to kind of work with our with our parents and with our with our communities in order to make that change because when we talk about accountability measures and and part of the project that we're doing this we're trying to get the schools to be accountable to the community because they can be accountable to Ofsted and I'm like that's fine, but like, I don't know. I've yet to meet a teacher who really loves Ofsted, who thinks Ofsted is the greatest thing in the world. And it's like I I haven't. I haven't met that person yet. So. So that tells me something about the accountability measures. And we're like, oh, yeah, it's good. And we're, we're that petrified of it. Like, we should not be petrified but we should be more worried about our parents and of our young people than we are of Ofsted.

00:32:44 Claire

Absolutely, yeah.

00:32:48 Curtis

Yeah. And I feel like if we were in community with our parents and the students and our and our kind of staff, then we would be better equipped to fight against like, I guess, like the kind of rigid account, accountability measure which kind of keep coming down because if we if we're at the moment, if you think about a school, like trying to go.

00:33:05 Curtis

Trying to fight parents over here and then fight Ofsted over there. You're gonna lose. But if you can go, "we're gonna galvanise and we're like we're probably not gonna get outstanding. And that's because we're doing XY and Z, is everyone cool with that?" "Yeah, cool, Ofsted come, we understand, we're not outstanding, we're good, we keep it moving. Like it's fine"

00:33:22 Curtis

Even if we wanted to get outstanding, we could go, "we're gonna get outstanding and we'll do what schools do at the moment, right? And we'll perform on those on those days and we could, we could potentially get it and then we'll go back to type." But yeah,

I don't know. I don't really know. Like what, what we're doing in terms of accountability measures, but I do think in terms of deficit ideology being I guess, I guess like a system. It's it's it really is like it really is an ideology, the ideology, because it kind of it feeds into so much that we think and do. And we'll often get asked like, "what is the opposite of deficit ideology?" And the thing we have to say is it's not strengths-based.

00:34:04 Curtis

It's not asset-based because asset-based and strengths-based basically say 'there's a successful norm here and these are the ways that you're like that successful norm', deficit thinking says 'there's this successful normal and these are the ways you're not like it.' They're two sides of the same coin.

00:34:18 Curtis

So. So we have to have a commitment to equity, like that's the opposite of it. It's like it's active because deficit ideology is active. It is, it's in everything. And we can look at things like I dunno, we can look at, like, evidence based. But if your evidence based intervention is based on that deficit assumption. Then I I care not for the evidence. It doesn't make any sense. Like there there's there's like scientific records that say that like men are smarter than women because they got bigger heads. Is that evidence based? Should I just walk around saying that's the that's correct. No. Because we know that it's it's it's a farce. So we also.

00:34:56 Curtis

Have to understand that like some of these evidence bases, which are basically just blaming, young people have also has to be a farce because there's there's cos it's not unique to this young person like it's it's happening for 50 plus years. So we have to do something very different in order to kind of.

00:35:16 Curtis

To do is to to kind of change that. But the thing that we have to do is different. It's not. It's not like radical, it's not, it's not. It's not crazy. It's like should we just honour everyone as human beings because at the moment, not even teachers are being treated as full human beings. Teachers are leaving because they're not being treated as full human beings. They're they're they're there and do you know what I mean, you're like a body in a room and you need to control these 30 young people and all of that and I think we're getting, we're getting worse as well when we start introducing scripts for teachers.

00:35:46 Curtis

And that's because we're in this horrible cycle where teachers are leaving. So then we get teachers in and these teachers are coming in quicker and quicker, so then they're

not as prepared to teach in the classroom to them, like, how can we prepare them? How can we upskill, them or we can just like deskill all teachers and just give them a script.

00:36:06 Curtis

And then the teachers that do have some skills and stuff like that, they're like "I don't wanna do a script because, do you know what I mean, this is this is a this is a calling. This is my profession." So we're de-professionalising them. Which again when we de-professionalise teachers we are we increasing the risk of like safeguarding concerns of for young people so we're increasing their vulnerability once again.

00:36:27 Curtis

But then once they leave, then we have to kind of double down and and go. We need to be more punitive. We need to be more scripted. We need to do blah blah blah. And that's just where we're going. And I think the thing that we're not looking at which is coming up across the horizon is the fact that like, I call it fact, maybe, maybe it's not, maybe it's just a fiction.

00:36:46 Curtis

Maybe it's my idea, but like what I what I see coming is that young people who survive these punitive systems feel like it was good for them in the same way as you know, that someone will go, "oh, I was in the army and it was really good for me" or "I went to prison and it straightened me out." Like all of that kind of stuff stuff.

00:37:05 Curtis

They're going to become teachers and they're going to become head teachers and their schools are going to be horrible because they survived that system and they thought it was the best for them and that's where we're going to go. I'm like...

00:37:17 Claire

"Yeah, it's that age-old thing of like, "oh, it didn't do me any harm." Yes. Like it. It really did. And you're here perpetuating that harm.

00:37:25 Curtis

Yeah, that's where we're going. Like, if you were, if you were raised in a scripted school, super punitive, quite horrible. I don't know what you're gonna do when you run a school, but I can tell you it's not going to be good.

00:37:38 Claire

Yeah.

00:37:39 Curtis

But we have to kind of put the brakes on that now because if we don't, it's gonna be.

00:37:45 Curtis

It's just gonna be too much to unpick, which I why I say we keep creating a rod for our own back.

00:37:48 Claire

Yeah, and I love the idea that the way we put the brakes on that is by slowing down and asking questions and forming community. So like in our project, we're we're working with 10 schools in Bristol and their surrounding communities and we're...

00:38:04 Claire

We're trying to build up this picture of of Bristol and what that looks like educationally and what we're finding is schools are saying, you know, we've got really great ties with the community and you know, we really understand the community, we sort of shape our curriculum for our community and when we sort of delve a little bit deeper, it's like, OK, if you're shaping your curriculum for the community then you know, why are you teaching exactly the same as a school on the other side of Bristol, you know where, where's the community input into that and...

00:38:32 Claire

And then there's a big part of it missing. I think, you know, they they may do some work with parents, but it's often they open to parents and parents self-select to come in. So there's a lot of parents missing from that.

00:38:44 Curtis

And the debt will show up in that as well.

00:38:45 Claire

Yeah. And they're not, they're not actually engaging with the community. So I don't think schools really understand what community is beyond: One - we have a school community, which is kind of everyone within our gates.

00:39:00 Claire

And maybe the parents. And then we've got a local community that we can kind of use as a resource. So we might go and visit something or we might get a speaker in. But there's there's no sense of, like, community between the people in the school and and just the locals living living in that area. And I don't, I don't know it feels like schools aren't communities anymore and I guess that's part of that debt that we've been talking about that's been, been passed down? I mean, I don't know.

00:39:27 Claire

If that's...

00:39:29 Claire

What are your thoughts on that? Is there like where where's community gone? I kind of guess is what I'm asking.

00:39:34 Curtis

Yeah, I think I think you really have to be intentional, like you have to kind of be intentional and and know that it's not going to kind of like you can be intentional about creating community like like now and you might not see the rewards of that for five or six years.

00:39:50 Curtis

But if you believe that community is important, then you keep doing it because you know it to be important, because it's not gonna happen overnight because people are just like, "I send my kid to school and the school deals with that and then and then they come back to me." So in order to kind of change that narrative and change that kind of culture, you're going to have to do it but you have to kind of stay true and I think what is what's really interesting is that we can take, we can take kind of, we can take lessons from like the super punitive schools. So like the Michaela School or the Mossbourne schools in terms of they are really going for what they're going for, right? They have an ideology, they believe in it, and that's what they're doing. They're gonna follow it through. And you have to admire that in some in some way because it doesn't matter if the Guardian write something, or BBC says something, they're like this is what we said, this what we're doing.

00:40:42 Curtis

So, so, so like we got we. And so the thing that I would say is that like you've got a school over here which has banned prayer. And I'm saying to another school, "maybe you should let children go to the toilet during during their lessons." I'm like, "it's OK like they banned prayer, the Guardian wrote something and they didn't care. If we do this other thing over here it's going to be OK."

00:41:03 Curtis

Because no one's going to come in and go, "Oh my God. You let them go to the toilet?" Yeah, because they're human beings, like on a basic level. Like, we've got young people in a space who can't go to the toilet, who can't regulate their own body temperature because some schools will tell you, "you have to keep your blazer on until I decide it's too hot."

00:41:26 Curtis

And then do you know, I'm like, what what's actually going on? And then you're like, "learn and pay attention." Like if I need to go to the toilet or I'm too hot, I can't concentrate on anything. I'm like, yeah, it just doesn't make any sense. And even if the young person gets up and doesn't go to the toilet.

00:41:41 Curtis

'Ohh well', that's what we all do anyway, you know, I mean, like if you go to university, if you go to places of learning, not everyone's sat in silence. Some people've got headphones on and are reading, some people... So we have to kind of prepare young people for actually what the world of learning looks like. But yeah, I don't know. I went off on a little tangent but I think like in terms of community...

00:41:57 Curtis

We just have to be intentional if we believe in it, then we do it and I remember speaking to a school one time where we said to them like, what do you want for your school? And they said all of these wonderful things. They want young people to feel valuable. They want young people to think critically, they want to blah blah blah. And I was like, so how do you measure this? And then they were like, "we use the Ofsted framework."

00:42:17 Curtis

Actually, what, so what what I said in between that actually was like, what prevents you from doing that? They said "Ofsted". Then I said how do you measure the thing that you want? And they said, "Ofsted".

00:42:26 Curtis

And I was like, so you've put the barrier in because what you could do is you could measure what you want and then you fit that into the Ofsted framework, not get the Ofsted framework and then try and get what you want out of it. No. Prioritise the thing that you want and then fit it into the other thing. Otherwise I don't know. Otherwise we're only going to get those out.

00:42:50 Curtis

This it's just a quick move. It's not. And then we go, OK, this is what this is really what we want. But we also know what Ofsted want. We're not gonna pretend that they don't exist. Like we know this is what we want. We know this is what Ofsted want and we can do both things. But we're not gonna kind of go, you know, you know, the whole, like, walk around like Ofsted's like the Holy Grail. They've got every young person's best interest at heart because we can see that's not that's not the truth. So yeah, measure what we actually want. So if we want community be intentional and know that it's not going to happen in a year or two and know that there's a long term implementation

implementations, not just like this term, we're gonna focus on that and this next time we're gonna focus on this, like, that's it's nonsensical.

00:43:35 Claire

Absolutely. And I think that's, you know, that's scary for schools, isn't it? Saying maybe you don't have to do what Ofsted want and you know you're not going to see instant results.

00:43:43 Claire

You know, and with high turnover of staff etcetera that can be really scary, but...

00:43:49 Claire

You know, I don't know. None of what you're saying sounds scary to me. It sounds like common sense.

00:43:55 Claire

You know, focusing on people as humans and thinking about the kind of humans that we want out in the world because, yeah, even by the kind of flawed system that we live in, we're not meeting that metric at the moment. You know, universities are saying kids aren't leaving college equipped to be undergraduates.

00:44:15 Curtis

Yeah.

00:44:15 Claire

And you know that's a real problem. And what if we, you know, as a starting point kind of look at kind of what employers and universities want.

00:44:24 Claire

You know, rather than like it, it kind of it leads me to think, like, who's whose metric is this if it's not, you know, if it's not what capitalism wants, it's not what the employers and the universities want, like, you know, where does it come? Where's it come from? And you know, that could probably be a whole different conversation, but.

00:44:36 Curtis

Yeah, I don't know

00:44:43 Claire

Let's kind of before we move on to our final question, did you want to say a little bit about the the report that's being launched today?

00:44:50 Curtis

Oh yeah, yes, it's today.

00:44:52 Claire

So be out by the time the podcast goes out, so it's exciting times.

00:44:54 Curtis

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, is is. It's really exciting. So we so like I said, it's our 5th birthday. So we launched a report which is An Argument for Possibility. So it's basically covering the the bits that we're talking about now. And I guess it's like it's it's slightly different to to our reports because we haven't just gone. These are all the things that are a problem – we know.

00:45:20 Curtis

We're like, these are the things that are a problem and there's... and like there's also some bits that we're probably not, we're probably not thinking about at the moment, but the the solve is for us, it's like it's easy because it's just like it goes back to that, 'let's just do what we know to be true' and let's just concentrate on these 4 principles, knowing that like, we think that that is, that matters.

00:45:38 Curtis

And it's gonna it's gonna kind of do something. So yeah, the report's out. It talks a lot about our our embedded pilot and what we're doing there and like how we're how we're doing that and also it's just like I guess helps us kind of understand deficit ideology a little bit better because for some reason I don't, I don't know why, but like they talk a lot about it in America, but they don't talk about it so much in the UK and it's what's really interesting for us and this is probably like a little sidebar is that like we we take this kind of this learning from from America like Gloria Ladson Billings, Paul Gorski, Richard Valencia and others. Also like, I guess, like our kind of key thinkers are Paulo Freire and bell hooks, who are both fantastic thinkers.

00:46:24 Curtis

But when we kind of put that forward, people are like, "oh, I don't know if something from America's gonna work," and I'm like, "alright, cool. Talk to me about Teach First then my friends." Do you know what I mean, like, that...

00:46:34 Claire

Academies, which you know, Charter Schools like, yeah.

00:46:36 Curtis

Yeah.

00:46:37 Curtis



It's all there, so some like we can copy it here, but over here we wouldn't copy it, it's like why? Why would we not? But I think a really kind of key understanding of deficit ideology and understanding kind of what that kind of leads to is for us is like super helpful because I think if...

00:46:57 Curtis

If people read our report and they go, and they were, if they're in class the next day and say, "oh, I think is that deficit ideology?" that's good because that's slowing down. That's it. That's all you have to do is just question just go, "is it that" and like "I don't know." And that for us is like a huge impact because it means that you might engage in a conversation with your colleague. It means that you're engaging in critical reflection yourselves or, and you're going "oh, maybe I will change that slightly," or maybe "I'll, I'll, I'll think about that." But like going through the motions, is not gonna be the one and like counting down the holidays. It's not gonna be the one. Right. So we have to kind of think about ways that we can just pause our practice and I hope that the report kind of offers that as like a helpful kind of way to to support people, to be able to articulate their frustration because, they're all very, like...

00:47:49 Curtis

All of the challenges that we see in education, mental health, teacher retention, teacher retention, mental health and behaviour and exclusions, they're all very much linked. They're all just playing to each other and we're gonna. And the more that we kind of, the more we exclude or I guess that the more the teachers leave, the more we have to exclude because we have to get more, narrow behaviour because we're getting more teachers in that and it's it's it's just like it just compounds it. It's just like this horrible cycle that we're gonna kind of...

00:48:18 Curtis

Keep going. I think in when we were doing a report, we were we were we were talking about it as a cycle, but we couldn't work out where it started because it's got like it's it's just like it's like a chicken and egg kind of situation. It's like was it teachers left first or was it did we get super punitive? Like when relationships breakdown, we get more punitive, right? Like...

00:48:26 Claire

Yes.

00:48:38 Curtis

So so that that just makes sense. Like even even in like the workplace. Like if you we go and get the policy when the relationship is not there. Yeah, we're like, well, we we're just going down going down the the policy route because we're gonna kind of separate this

out. We're just gonna be robotic. So that's what's happening in the school at the moment. So we have to get back to the place where we're like "ohh young people are human beings. Teachers are human beings, TA are human beings, parents: also human beings and let's like think about that." But at the moment we're we're kind of partitioning people as kind of some people are full humans, some people are semi-humans, some people are non-human like in that kind of in that education space, and no one is like less than a human being. Like if you're not valued, just like you being a person, then we're you know, we're chipping away at all of those, all of those kind of ways that young, well, we're, I guess we're chipping away, but we're just increasing all those risk factors which are going to leave young people vulnerable in the very end, which is super sad.

00:49:38 Claire

100% and and I I think I know the answer to this question because you've already articulated it, but because we end all of our episodes this way, I'm going to ask what would a just education system look like to you?

00:49:53 Curtis

A just education system would look like like thinking about humans first like so it would be built on the humanity of of individuals. And I think there's really something like powerful that Paulo Freire would say in terms of when we dehumanise young, when we dehumanise anybody, we're actually dehumanising ourselves because central to kind of understanding humans is seeing humans and recognising other people as human beings and in in school it plays out really interestingly, because we don't let kids go to the toilet.

00:50:24 Curtis

And then when you look at like the stats around who, which professions are more likely to get UTI's? Teachers. So like, you're so both of us are not able to do basic stuff.

00:50:35 Claire

Yeah.

00:50:36 Curtis

Which means that neither of us are able to be human in this space. So I think being able to kind of put put really like relationships, humanity at the forefront.

00:50:45 Curtis

And really just work towards something, knowing that it also it's probably not gonna happen in our lifetime, which is fine, but we have to start walking that path because if

we keep going down these other paths at the moment, it's gonna be a little bit crazy and and I feel like probably like my most unpopular opinion would be that like...

00:51:06 Curtis

In terms of schools as well, a just education system would probably be probably wouldn't have a mentoring project attached, right? It probably wouldn't have a, a, a mental health kind of worker embedded in the school which like mental health charities will advocate for, for obvious reasons, like one: because that's what young people need, but two: obviously it's gonna sustain the organisation as well, so there's like a dual, dual purpose.

00:51:30 Curtis

For us, we want to kind of give the practice out as best as possible and then cease to exist because we're like, if we can change 2 schools, then as a team of like I don't know, 5 or 6, we've probably done what we could do, like we're not gonna change the world, but we could - can change a couple of the schools. So I think just education would probably just make more sense.

00:51:54 Curtis

It would probably kind of tick some kind of capitalist outcomes as well as kind of as well as just kind of affirming the humanity of young people and teachers. Like, it's not even radicals, just logic. And we're going to have to do it at some point.

00:52:09 Claire

Absolutely, and I think that's that's a really nice place to finish that, you know, these aren't...

00:52:14 Claire

Nothing you said today is a radical idea. It's just about caring for people and treating them well and you know then all that other stuff that you know Ofsted want to measure and, you know, schools want to be seen to be successful in that, that would follow. Yeah. You know, if you if you affirm people's humanity, then they'll do well.

00:52:33 Curtis

Yeah. Like if if they were, if people think about, like, their workplace, right, if your workplace is more friendly or inviting, more kind of caring for you. Productivity goes up like because people feel like, so I'm like, that's the logic we're following and we're not, we're not saying we don't care about exams like we we care like it's it's OK. But like we just want to create a better environment for young people to be able to do that where they feel just that you know, I feel valued and like if I don't get the result, I also understand that I'm valuable. So therefore it's not gonna. It's not gonna be, like, so

detrimental to me that I'm never gonna be able to recover. I'm gonna be sick and like. Yeah, it's like, actually, yeah. I didn't get the result. OK, no worries. I've got Plan B. I've got plan. I got plan C and we can keep it moving.

00:53:20 Curtis

And that's the that's the type of young people before we want in the world anyway, who can kind of, do you know what I mean? I won't use the word resilience because I think that's a it's a, it's a bit of an ugly word. We're not trying to get young people to be... they shouldn't have to be resilient to be able to access education. I think that's a bit mad. But I think that for us is I guess like a different way of understanding or articulating resilience to be able to think critically and move forward, move through the world.

00:53:46 Claire

And to be able to believe in themselves. Yeah. So, yeah. Well, this has been a great conversation. Thank you so much. And and good luck for the launch tonight. Thank you.

00:53:54 Curtis

No worries. Thank you very much. Be easy.

00:53:58 Claire

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