TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

Episode #284
Nicholas Bradford:

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Nicholas Bradford:
If we are actually trying to change behavior of young people, so that they can be in groups, in community, in school, so that they can be from schools into the soccer team, and from schools and soccer team to college or the workforce in our communities, then we have to sort of remove this idea that I'm gonna punish my way to good behavior.

Annalies Corbin:
Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Nicholas Bradford, founder of the National Center for Restorative Justice. Nicholas, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Nicholas Bradford:
Glad to be here, thank you.

Annalies Corbin:
Excellent, super happy to have you here. Let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. The National Center for Restorative Justice has challenged the conventional retributive justice system, a system that excludes, isolates, and punishes youth in schools, juvenile justice, and family systems. Furthermore, they seek to expand on the theory, language, and practice of the greater restorative justice community, and they believe relationships are key to living a joyous life. Conflict is the difference between what was expected and what actually happened.

So, Nicholas, that's an awful lot and there's an awful lot of conversation, fortunately, these days in schools and in communities about the way that we've been doing things just are not really working for youth. It's largely punitive and it's not recognizing that we've got all these individuals with different backgrounds and experiences and that

we can do things very, very differently. So high level, tell us about the center itself, the National Center. When did it get started? Where did it come from? Just give us a little bit of the sort of background context and then we're gonna dive into some of the more specific topics.

Nicholas Bradford:
So we founded almost 10 years ago, actually. I was doing some math, and it was October 2016 when I founded the National Center for Restorative Justice. And we've been going strong ever since. Obviously, some hiccups through COVID, changing our delivery model and sort of how we were trying to influence and help teachers do the work that they're doing. But we've been growing and sort of trying to include more people and include more opportunities for folks to engage with us from online courses to our bread and butter of in-person courses that we believe both adult learning takes time and, also, we can provide an experience of restorative justice in person that we can't do through books or through online courses as much as we are able to be online and do remote work, which is really, really important to sort of spreading this work. It's just important that we sit together and really get into it.

And that's what I find to be the best way to change people's perspective on this work, which is you've got to sit in circle with people that you care about or don't care about, and then you learn to care about them, or you have to sit in a conference with young people or adults who harmed other people and see the recognition and the connectedness that we can form through those restorative conferences, that's how you change people's perspectives on this work.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. For those that might be struggling with, okay, what does this even mean, restorative justice? Give us the sort of hundred-thousand-foot view of, what do you mean? What does your work in your center specifically mean by the phrase restorative justice?

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, I want to back up because I think there's a word that you used previously, which is this idea of punishment. And I think that when we talk about classroom harm and classroom misbehavior and stuff like that, we often associate it with this idea of punishing.

And what we're trying to do at the National Center and restorative justice in general is to juxtapose that or sort of remove that idea as an idea that is effective. It certainly is a thing that happens but the idea of effectiveness, if we are actually trying to change behavior of young people, so that they can be in groups, in community, in school, so that they can be from schools into the soccer team, and from schools and soccer

team to college or the workforce in our communities, then we have to sort of remove this idea that I'm going to punish my way to good behavior.

I think if we're metaphorically and sometimes physically hitting kids with sticks, they just learn really effective strategies to avoid getting hit with that stick. They don't actually understand why it is, what they've done has hurt somebody else, right? And I really want young people to know and recognize that their actions hurt other people that they might not now care about, but they'll grow to care about those folks.

And I think that that's an important part of this sort of juxtaposition is like, we need, also, young people to care about but they'll grow to care about those folks. And I think that that's an important part of this juxtaposition is like, we need also young people to care about adults, and adults to care about young people, and adults to care about adults, and young people to care about young people. That's how do we get that ball moving in the direction of, like, I do actually care about my actions and how they impact other people.

So, this idea of punishment, we're really trying to interrupt and disrupt this idea as like a way to effectively change behavior. And we can sort of go back and forth on like, do we want to change behavior or not? And I think that, you know, we certainly are in that space of like, yeah, I think it's important that we can't solve our problems with violence. Like, it's not okay to just swear at people and hit people. It's not an effective strategy.

So, we use restorative justice, which is this relational post to conflict. It's like really trying to balance two things at the same time, which is, we know as educators, and you know, like, I'm sure you have more research on this than I do, like that relationships are the keys to the kingdom. If we can get young people in good relationship with themselves, with each other, and with the adults in their lives, both parents and educators, then we can really move this stuff forward. You know, whether it's just strictly academic performance, or it's all the other social, emotional, and sort of non-cognitive variables that we're looking for.

And so, the relationship piece is key but young people being young people and humans being humans, you are going to hurt people. Hopefully as adults, we've learned to mitigate most of that, but we're still hurting people, people that we care about deeply. I think about my wife and like all the times that I have like impacted her negatively, and my children who are four and a half and two and a half, like every time that I come off strong, like how do I repair?

And so, this is the work of restorative justice. And so why it's hard is because we're trying to do two things at the same time, build relationships and engage in the conflict, engage in the conflict, repair the conflict. That's hard work. And especially, I mean,

even for somebody like me, who's been doing this work for 10-15 years, especially for young people who are in the midst of developing a frontal cortex, in the midst of a lot of social pressure, and in the midst of a culture that doesn't encourage them to take responsibility for their actions, understand that they have an impact on other people, you know, especially for younger kids, like, even manifesting that other people are whole human beings, like, that's hard. And so, having care and compassion around that.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. So, the good news is there's a lot of movement in this direction, across the country, around the world. We're starting to see more and more that schools in particular are saying, "Hey, that old punitive system, it's just not working. Our kids are not responding to it." I mean, we never responded to it because it was never a process that was in the best interest of the people involved in the mix. But we are finally starting to see some pretty substantial pushback from the ground up, our young people themselves really, really pushing back on some of the old ideologies that we're using in our educational settings.

So, I guess what I really am trying to get at here is let's talk a little bit about not so much the why we see that momentum shift changing but, more importantly, what exactly does it mean? What are the principles, those restorative principles that we're talking about utilizing in K-12 settings, and how do they truly differ from the ways that we just know fundamentally and intuitively just don't work, nor should they, because they don't honor the people in the mix, right?

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah. Punishment is sometimes we look at and we see some behavior that changes. But what happens in our experience, my experience is that young people get really good at hiding it. That was really my experience as a high school student. I got good at hiding smoking marijuana, like not actually changing that behavior along with all my friends. We're like, "Cool, I'm just gonna go do it somewhere else where you're not around," not actually reflecting on the behavior change. But sorry, I digress.

So, the sort of community is wide and varied. And so, our principles, kind of, there's theory principles and then there's kind of practical strategies and things like that. And so those things are different. Like some of our principles are, engage all stakeholders and empower often the victim. So, that's specific language to how we talk about this stuff. And engage all stakeholders is a real kind of spectrum. As the harm goes up, we want more people at the table.

So, in the case of bomb threats, right? So, the young person had a bunch of three bomb threats called into his school. And so, what do you do with that and sort of how many people were around? And it was like 20 plus or minus two folks. A

superintendent was there, AP, and all this other stuff, and like family members from the school, kids from the school. So, that was a big conference. His mom, his sister, his baseball coach were all there, right? So like, that's a big thing.

Annalies Corbin:
So, this is just for clarity for our listeners. So, this is around an individual student who three times called him bomb threats to a school building?

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, yeah.

Annalies Corbin:
Okay, perfect. Keep going. Sorry.

Nicholas Bradford:
So, that's some of the theory principle, and we're just engaging all stakeholders, and that means engaging more people than we normally think about it, because traditionally, how that would have been approached is the superintendent or the assistant sup of the school district would have had an up or down, this kid's expelled. Like, likely he would have been expelled. And that kid would have gone to a different school district, maybe 10 miles away, and not had any sort of reintegration, not had any sort of relational saying like, you're a valued member of our community. And also, please don't do that again in the future, which isn't enough. So, that's a sort of a theory idea, which is engaging all stakeholders.

The other part of that is the system stuff, which is like, what's a restorative conference look like when really, really bad things happen? What's a restorative conference look like when sort of medium light things happen, medium bad things happen, like fights. You know, fights that don't involve a knife, fights that don't involve serious violence. Lots of middle schoolers get into fights all the time. I don't want to be using a big system that it takes 20 people outside the school system to make this work.

And so, what we did, what I did early on in my career was develop some strategies that allow both teachers and APs or deans or whoever's sort of running that school discipline work to manage conflict into some way. This is sort of like a real... you have to recognize the resources that you have in a way that we're batching, we're being efficient with our time and energy. When young people are having restorative conversations, are they just like having one and then going back, having one and going back? Like, what's that look like?

And so, we've got some other strategies that were put in place. So, that's, sort of, sometimes what people are talking about when they're talking about what's the implementation look like? Yeah, relationship building circles in the classroom,

accountability circles in the classroom, restorative conversations, restorative chat sometimes even, non-evaluative language. Those are all things that are happening in the classroom, in and around that classroom. And there's some sort of dovetailing in between the classroom and the office, which is like some supportive work that kind of looks the same, but adults are coming in to support the teacher, teachers having those conversations.

And detention, what's detention look like? And how do we get young people who aren't there because they're in trouble, but to act as voices for kids who need some positive peer pressure to do the right thing, right? How do we have adults in detention spaces that aren't just there to be like, "Nicholas, you're a bad boy. Stare at a wall for an hour," right? Actually, like, dive into it. And so, we've done some work with some juvenile justice organizations near us to create a process for them that we in turn do some small changes to allow a school to use in detention.

And then, your conferences and things like that. So, there's a lot of different strategies that go through. And I think that that's one place, and not to sort of get on my soapbox, but that's one place that restorative systems struggle with sometimes is if we only have relationships and restorative conferences, we miss some of the gaps. But we do have gaps in our theories, in our sort of application.

Annalies Corbin:
So, we've, several times on Learning Unboxed, had the opportunity to talk about restorative justice and different veins and iterations and implementations of what this looks like. And one of the themes that I have seen come up over and over again is the idea of the role of students and peers in the restorative process, creating a culture around, sometimes, the phrase student-led restorative practices is utilized or just sort of individualized interventions that have peer components to them.

You know, at the end of the day, our students are incredibly social, and they are in many ways really, really great at being sort of the rallying around an individual and changing systemic behaviors, if you will. And also in many ways being really, really empathetic to the journey of an individual in their midst. So, talk a little bit about that and how the work that you do sort of interplays with that because that is a thread of this conversation that has come up time and again.

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, 100%. I think the kids are just essential to doing this work really well. And they provide some voice. Young people who are kind of in trouble often or struggling to do the right things, they hear adults say like, "Oh, you could do better, Nicholas. You could do anything that you put your mind to." And at some point, that gets turned off and they need other voices. And some kids, they'll narrate like, "Oh, you know, you're saying that because you get paid to," or whatever.

But like when you have peers and I think about... I say this often, like, you have to have young people who are in your system and your programs who have a lot of social capital. One of the schools that I worked with early on, like a real spectrum of young people, some kids who are in this is a high school, some kids who come into school with like tweed jackets and like yellow patches and like, no offense to kids who wear that. So, I had a good friend of mine who smoked a pipe in high school and it was like, "All right, dude, that's cool for you," but that young person, as great an ambassador as he was to administration, to adults, he was a really a mediocre ambassador to other young people.

And that's just the, sort of, nature of these systems and how young people interact with each other. You have to have young people who have a lot of social capital interacting with kids. If we want them to change behavior, if we want them to kind of connect, find that moment of connection where you're all talking about Fortnite, where you're all talking about whatever TikTok thing is happening, and then say, "I believe in you, I care about you, this is the best place for you, and you can't solve your problems with violence, can't sell drugs on campus, can't start a fire in the bathroom. So, that we're on the same page with. So, now, what are we gonna do?"

And that happens at all different levels. Some of the role for adults though, I think, we need to always be engaged as adults. We have a responsibility both, kind of, morally and also by our job descriptions. We've got to participate in this stuff. But sometimes, young people, yeah, there's all kinds of odd things. And I don't think it's a particular problem for young people when they facilitate. I think it's also a problem, sometimes, for adults when they facilitate. Like these restorative conferences, because you talk about the kid who has the... students who have a lot of empathy, right? If you get into this work with restorative justice, there's a high chance that you have a lot of empathy, you care about the success, the young people in your care, and you can see immediately the young person who's using drugs or selling drugs to either numb or to financially support themselves or their family. And there's a lot of care that comes out really quickly.

And also, we have to help both young people who what we would call community representatives and ourselves say, like, "Yeah, and drugs do hurt people, and you can't do that stuff on campus. And I understand that you're angry, and you've got a lot of reasons to be angry, and maybe your dad wasn't a great representation of either being present or a demonstration of violence to solve those problems. But we can't do that here. And we've got to have some sense of repair, some sense of engaging with that difficult action that you had."

And so I'm always trying to balance young people in community and facilitator roles. I think it's an essential part, but it's also in balance with all the work that we can do.

Because the other part of this that I wanted to just like touch on is the more we offer young people opportunities like this, and even just as a peer or as a community member, we give them the skills, we give them opportunities, the at-bats to say, 'Hey, like the thing you did, I didn't like it," right? And that ability is a really, really important one. Like the ability to say, "I don't like what you're doing, stop," is so important for every harmful interaction in the future, whether it's dating, whether it's out late at a club or whatever, at a bar, or like 15-20 years down the road, and your parents are still like getting on you about stuff. And you're like, "Yeah, I don't like that. I'm trying to set boundaries," right?

So, the boundary setting practice, when we do it early and they get lots of at bats, I mean, it pays dividends so, so much on whether it's work stuff or family stuff. I mean, it's been really powerful.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. So, let's talk a little bit, Nicholas, about the process. So, you and your organization go into a new community that has not really spent a lot of time digging in, but willing because they asked someone to come in and help, right? So, that's the big win. That's the first win, I should say, right? Super important.

Okay. So, help us understand, what happens? What does it actually look like? Because that's the other thing that I hear a lot from folks. There's a lot of interest in shifting the way we do the business of this piece of helping our young people grow up into maturity but we don't always know how to do this differently. So, what does it look like? How does this work get started in a new community?

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah. Just one step before that, typically how folks find us and before they're committing to a big contract for us to come to a school or a district, is they come to one of our trainings. They come to a three-day training. And we have anywhere between like 15 and 30 people in a training. And there's just a lot of knowledge download on a lot of practices.

And then, they go back. Ideally, it's a group of three to four, but sometimes there's just one administrator who comes to this training and they're like, "This really makes sense for us. How do we get you over here?" So, then, we get into the dialogue.

And then people, they know what they're asking for. I think that that's one thing that like, oftentimes, in restorative communities but also in consultants at large, is there's a lot of like, "I'm saying this thing, and they're saying that they want that thing, that product, that sort of approach, but we're still not on the same page yet." And so, it takes months sometimes for us to get on the same page. And the way we've done it and we've been able to do it is people come to our trainings, we get on the same

page, and then say, "Yeah, let's do this." And I know it's a big commitment for folks. I mean, three days, five days is a huge commitment.

So, that being said, I think 90% of our consultant work comes in that direction from people who've attended our trainings. But as we walk into schools, as we sort of enter in and we're talking to a leadership team and we're thinking about level setting, then it really is like, where is the low-hanging fruit? Where's the easy stuff for us to approach? And where's the need, right? So, it's both a need and ease. Like, is it an alternative school that has a lot of 10-day suspensions, right? If you've got 150 students in an alternative setting, and you've got five to 15 students on long-term suspension, that's 10% of your population. That's a big deal.

Annalies Corbin:
And it's very telling about what's going on in your space?

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah.

Nicholas Bradford:
Right. And so, great, let's address that, right? Because I know working with a lot of alternative settings, like those teachers are great at building relationships, and I'm 100% like, let's do some relationship building, of course, but really where we need to spend our time and energy is here.

Elementary schools? Probably not, right? Elementary schools and most of the principals and APs and deans that I've seen, and I've seen a lot, elementary schools don't tend to rely on suspensions. You know, it's a real rare case where you're like, "No, this kid's got to go for five days or three days." Even those things are really rare, like one or two a year.

But it's recess, right? Great. Okay, well, let's tackle recess. Let's figure out, how do we train and support our resource monitors, and develop some peer mentors, and have a space and do that kind of stuff? So really, our approach in that is we have our trainings, our pre-packaged stuff that we're going to deliver kind of the ideas and the principles to whole staff and whole school. But then, it's like each school and each sort of approach is, where are your needs and where's our easiest sort of adaptation to this work?

And relationship building in the classroom is really important. Sometimes, it's sort of like that second tier of young people who are... it just need more support and more

kind of intentional relationships. And so, we'll sort of develop some skills and some strategies and some processes that are collecting those young people to give them both the adult and the peer relationship that they need and deserve.

Annalies Corbin:
So, I love the direction of the conversation and the work because our kids deserve to be happy, to be healthy, to be safe, and to just feel like that they are seen and heard. So, I'm super curious about... I mean, you've been at this for a number of years now, since 2016. So, that's a lot of time on the ground up to your eyeballs in this work. I'm really, really curious as we sort of think about the totality of the conversation that we've had, where are the pain points? Like where do you see the biggest push or resistance? And how do communities overcome those?

Nicholas Bradford:
The easy answer right now is financial, is that across the country, schools are really struggling with budgets and things like that. And so, making this a priority is a challenge. I think that there's also been some difficult or less than ideal implementation of restorative justice and alternatives. And so, some classroom management has gotten a little... like, in the interest of caring about kids has gotten a little loose and a little rambunctious inside classrooms. And so, there's those two things.

But I think for restorative systems, and I really think about this work in particular, where it struggles, are two places. And I say this often, so forgive the repetition for anybody who's listened to me before. One, first place is the accountability. Accountability is essential, and it really sort of starts the process between a restorative system and a punitive system or a retributive system. Once we get accountability, great. Then, I can do all the restorative work that I want. But until I get that, we can't sort of move anywhere unless we're gonna move on to this path of punishment.

And that goes for adult, incarcerated people, and big stuff and small stuff. And so, what can be a challenge for implementation is being able to sit in that little crux for a little while and not forcing kids to take responsibility. Not saying, "Hey, Nicholas, if you don't take responsibility for actions right now, you're getting five days." And then, he said, "Oh, okay, fine, fine, fine, fine, I did it." That's not accountability.

Annalies Corbin:
It's coercion.

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, it's a coercion. He's taking a plea bargain.

Annalies Corbin:
Right, 100%, yeah.

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, as opposed to saying, "Hey, let me know what happened." And really being patient with that and saying, "You know what? I wanna give you as much time as you need. If this wasn't you, fine, let's figure out who did this or what happened, but I need to have a conversation about this. And I'm going to be here. And we can take as much of this day as you want to sit here and let me know."

And thinking about your school values, really grounding in your school values, saying, "We're the Bears and we believe in integrity," like whatever your mascot is or whatever your sort of values are. And kind of drilling back to that and saying that, "You're not a bad kid. You're really important to the school." I never want us to send kids... like our goal is to have a hard conversation and learn from this, this is an opportunity, really strength-based, positive framing of all that stuff, so that young people can, with both hands... both feet, excuse me, step into that spotlight that is shining a light on their mess that they've made.

And I think it's really, really important to slow this process down because what we're asking people to do is to take off their armor, to unburden themselves the mess that they've made. My friend and colleague who works in pre-K said this to me once, because I've done some work in adults' correctional facilities with folks who've committed murder, who murdered somebody. And he's like, "For a four-year-old who's struggling with keeping his hands to himself, and he's pushing and shoving and doing those kind of things, the spectrum of harm for him is like, 'That's the most violent thing that I can do is push and shove and be mean.'" Like, we know as adults that that's not the most thing. But like, I'm asking him to take responsibility for putting his hands on another kid in a way that's really scary for that other child.

There is some comparison to asking somebody in their 20s to, "Hey, I need you to admit that you murdered somebody," or "You punched somebody in the face and you broke their orbital lobe," right? And that you need to stand up here in front of a jury and sort of say that out loud. That's a very risky thing.

And so, giving some kids some grace and giving our facilitators some skills around coaching on people to say like, "Yeah, what I'm asking you to do is scary and hard. And I'm not here to punish you. I'm not here to take that response and then give you the three days. I'm here to help us walk through this together, so that we can repair both how you're feeling and how this other kid's feeling and how the kids around saw that happened."

And so, that's one of the big pieces that we're trying to grapple with as a community of restorative practitioners across the country is what accountability looks like. And that's where I've seen some rough implementation.

And the other side is the backside of this conversation, which is the repair. And the words that we use, sort of the action of repair, or the action of apology, don't just talk about it, be about it. And this is, for adults, I think, more difficult sometimes because we hear a kid who's in middle school, and they share their story about being homeless, or hungry, or abused, or maybe it was years ago, or whatever the trauma story is. And then, us saying, "Okay. And now, I need to make you do something to make amends." That's a hard thing for us to do, right? It's like a real hard thing.

Even for teachers who were the direct recipients of really hateful, vile language, right? Teachers who were like, "Oh, man. The thing that he said really cuts to the core." And you hear the story and you're like, "Wow, okay. I understand where this kid's coming from." And the teacher and the student hugged out and they go back to class. But what we missed, and this is really important that communities get this, is we missed the opportunity for the other kids to learn from my mistake. Like, "Yeah, I totally lost my cool, and I told Ms. Jones that she was a fat, ugly cow. And she's a person and I'm a person and you all are people." That's where we start to build the social capital for that kid later on.

So, now, he becomes an advocate, maybe a protector but at least an advocate, sort of a litmus test, a sounding board for other young people to reflect off, "Oh, yeah. Nicholas had this thing, and he was sharing his impact on Ms. Jones, and maybe that's something I can think about." All that kind of stuff pays dividends. But if we, what I sometimes call it like black box it, if we have these private conversations, and whether it's young people and young people or young people and adults, like having really intimate, helpful, kind conversations, but then we close that box and don't let anybody see it for fear of confidentiality and other things, we miss a third, if not two-thirds, of the value of that conversation.

Annalies Corbin:
We missed a learning opportunity. Yeah.

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah, yeah, totally, for everyone.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, we absolutely did. You know, Nicholas, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join us to share with us about the work that the National Center for Restorative Justice is doing and all of the amazing lessons that you've learned as well

in your journey through this work. So, just really, really appreciative of everything that you do and taking time to have this conversation with us.

Nicholas Bradford:
Yeah. Well, I appreciate it. And yeah, find me on social media, LinkedIn or Facebook, and I look forward to seeing some folks in our next trainings.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. We will make sure that we have all the information, contacts, links in the show notes. I encourage our listeners to please, please, please take a look at that. Reach out to Nicholas. Every community that I have had the privilege of being able to be part of that is putting in place restorative justice practices, it makes a huge difference for everybody involved. So please, please, please reach out. Thank you for joining us today. I'm your host, Annalies Corbin. So, thanks for being on Learning Unboxed.

Nicholas Bradford:
Thanks Annalies.

Annalies Corbin:
Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.