



Alin Bennett: How to Reimagine Education

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:01

Hi, Alin it is so wonderful to have you and Education Reimagined here today. Thank you for joining us.

Alin Bennett 00:09

Oh, it's so great to be here. I'm glad to join you and everyone else that is that are on the chat and, and watching us.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:16

Alin, could you tell us a little bit about you, and your journey as an educational activists and then about education reimaged, which, by the way, summit participants is an amazing resource. And it's like top level thinking and micro-school has been aspiring to be an active part of this, because to us, it's a gold bar. So I can't wait for you to hear this.

Alin Bennett 00:40

Yeah, and I can't wait to share all the resources with you that education reimaged can connect you with and the community that we're, we're building currently. So yeah, so everyone, my name is Alin Bennett, I currently serve as the vice president of practice and field advancement for education reimaged. But I have been working as an educational activist for for a long time. So a little bit about my background and story. Because I always believe in a learner centered, I'll start, like sort of my own learning journey, and what school experience was like, for me. I was always good, really good at playing the game of school and was always pretty successful in a, in a conventional school system, all my learning experiences as a young learner were were conventional. Until around sort of my adolescence, where I was kind of got disenfranchised, and fed up with that with the system, and was directed, you know, in my opinion, in a poor direction, based on sort of economic benefits of your education, what, where I would be the most successful with a certain lens of what success meant, largely like money and upward mobility. So I was actually directed to graphic design and web page design. And that's what I started my, my graduate work. I was not there for very long. And I found again, my original passion of being an educator and working with young people, and just really in love with learning, and helping others learn and learning with other people. So I went back to college, and went in as an education and history major, I like to say I'm a recovering history teacher. And so it was through that experience I was exposed to while the training teacher training was very conventional, I just was introduced to so many folks who had equity at the center of their work in education. It just reignited a passion that I didn't know I'd been actually pursuing until somebody actually called it



and named it and gave me language to express that it was that making education quality education accessible to every single child in this country. So my mentor at the time, Rhode Island College sort of took me on that journey. And I was able to pursue it and started off education in a teaching in a conventional system, like I said, as a history teacher. And in the UK, actually, I went to the UK to teach and get my postgraduate certification. And there was in the United Kingdom I was introduced to to S** Community School, which was really a community based school in northwest England, that were doing a lot of progressive things, what they call pastoral care, what we would probably call social emotional learning. Here in the United States, a lot of out of school learning. So they would spend of their three years of their secondary experience probably, you know, a cumulative of up to an entire year of doing all of their learning, and work based experience or internship life experience. And that sort of was really transformative for me that early look into servicing the whole child and letting the whole community be the playground for your learning. Once my Fulbright was up and I was ready to return back to the States, I found surprisingly enough, in my home state of Rhode Island that I didn't know about an organization called Big Picture Learning in the Met school have grown up a Rhode Island native grew up here, my entire left never heard of that amazing school. So I did some research before heading back home to the States. And it was immediate love. I shadowed there, did some quick volunteer stint. And then I was immediately part of that team as an advisor. And it was really that four year experience as an advisor where I followed 16 young learners. I was their primary educator in all the disciplinary subjects for all four years, where I took that huge leap into being a learner centered practitioner and just realize that that sort of education truly served the entire young person. It was, after my four years of an advisor that I was asked to take a building leader position. So I was a principal of the Unity building at the Met school in Providence, Rhode Island for six years, while also doing some support work and consulting work with the parent organization called Big Picture Learning. It was during my time with Big Picture Learning and Met school, I was introduced to Education Reimagined, which really helped give us some give me some distinctions and some language around what was actually going on. And what we were up to at the Med school that made that learning is so different and so impactful for young people.

05:39

And also where I was revealed that it wasn't just big picture learning networks and the you know, the Met doing that work that there have been silos and pockets of people doing the exact same thing, all the different language, it's calling a different things that we're up to the same powerful work. So I, you know, after being introduced and going through a couple of education reimagine's programs, I was asked to come consult, for education reimaged while I was still doing my work at the Met school. So I consulted with them for three years. And just recently, in March, I have transitioned to Vice President of practice and field advancement. And it is, it's been a great journey, and just really appreciative to continue and grow and grow and grow and learn with this network of amazing practitioners, building leaders policies, non, you know, nonprofits, youth development organizers, all of that.



Maureen O'Shaughnessy 06:35

That's amazing. It's fun. I have my mentor, teacher, when I student taught had just gotten back from a Fulbright in England and had done Bank Street, college learning so early on, I got inculcated into the whole child and how to bring it alive and how to students design the questions and the learning. So like you student centered, student driven learning has been in my blood for a long time. That's fun to hear your story on that? I wonder? This whole system they talked about that was there when you were in school and is there in 2021... Where will what degree will give me what kind of paycheck? It feels like there's a systemic piece that it's all about getting a good paycheck. So do the right thing in high school and do the right thing in college and get money. Systemically, where will that where do you see that leading us if that is the path that we continue to perpetuate as the right way to move our youth forward?

Alin Bennett 07:46

I think it really does not honor, the collective wisdom of our communities, and outcomes that not only the children want for themselves, because I don't think inherently a child comes into the system saying I want to accumulate wealth. I don't think a family when when I anytime I have talk to families, while they that is an important part, they want their child to thrive and be happy in what they're doing. And I think if you ask the community, the larger community that same question, yeah, they would like the community to be economically viable and strong. But they just want a healthy community where everyone is sort of in sync and is proud of the community and they're able to be their full authentic selves while in community with one another. So this educational systems focus on, quote, unquote, high achievement in service of being prepared to become to accumulate wealth is just a complete dishonoring of that bar. It only looks at that one narrow metric of success, that I think is just some one of the smallest parts of success. And I think it also drives the design, if you want, if the system is created for for individuals to be, to use that narrow metric of success, it's going to be it's, it's going to want to move with efficiency and standardization. Because they want the kids all have that same outcome, to be wealthy and to win or accumulate wealth and expand the economy. So that's that's what I think is the fallacy is if we're all going towards the same aims and outcomes, there's the system is always going to be standardized and uniform and work with efficient and try to work for efficiency.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 09:42

Ouch. That not honoring the individual kids and like sir Kenneth Robinson says, you know, not fostering schools, not fostering their creativity and, and putting them on that assembly line with everything standardized. It sounds painful, and we know our young adults are not thriving in the workforce, and a lot of them are in jobs that don't feel good to them at all, because they have to pay off student loans, and they're trapped already in their 20s. So this is just so tragic when they are our future of our country, and they have so much potential. I'm really excited that education reimagined is just that. It is reimagining and is pulling together so many resources and people. Tell us about some ways that education reimagined is helping, kind of break that one size fits all



trajectory. And it's all about being a doctor, lawyer engineer, and looking at honoring the individual kids.

Alin Bennett 10:40

Yeah, so education reimaged really subscribes to and tries to communicate that learner centered education is not a set of practices or a set of systems, it is foundationally, a paradigm shift. And it is a different mindset of what the purpose of education is. and it focuses on the very foundational piece is that the work of education is learning, not the delivery of education. And that just immediately leads you to different sorts of discoveries, when you think about it that way. If you're if the work of education is delivering education, then it suddenly becomes the focus of the thing that needs to be fixed is teaching. If you put the learner in, that the work of education is learning, that the the fix is how is this child learning, the individual child learning, so that's, that's where you start, that's your starting place. And then the you know, that shift is that education is done by and with the learner, not to the learner, from a teacher. It also, and, you know, that leads you to the next sort of, you know, realization that all learners are unique, they are capable, they are curious, and they are wondrous. And that every child, you know, infinite potential that they can bring into the world. And as education's job to help them find what they are, and how they are capable, curious, and how we can encourage that wonder and every every child, and that only happens when learning engages the passions in the purpose of the learner themselves. And is when you engage those interests, passions and aspirations, that, that all human beings, as soon as that happens, it's just a natural function. As soon as we become interested in passion about something, that area of our brain that sort of expedients learning is triggered, as opposed to just rote memorization like that deep learning happens when our passions and our purpose are engaged. And so you're left with this overall arching change, as opposed to that monetary chase that is probably the current outcome. The purpose of education is for each young person to discover who they are, what their unique gifts are, and how they can contribute those gifts meaningfully to the world. And that's your outcome. That's your overarching outcome. So what education reimaged does is help people who have that similar mindset, become part of a larger network, develop shared language, because it's almost like the Tower of Babel, that it's almost like a function of the system or the system, at least the current system benefits from that there are all these siloed works that are doing great work don't speak the same language, even though they're after the same thing. And so that movement cannot happen when we're all speaking different languages, or it can't move fast. And this needs to happen. Especially given the past year and a half. And all the damage done from the pandemic and our search for racial equity in this country. And we just also, what we've discovered is that the folks that have that mindset set shift, all have the same five elements within their environment, that we help them get that language so they all have strong agency, the learners have full agency in what they learn when they learn how they are, etc. The next part is that it's socially embedded, that it's fully recognized and encouraged and leverage that learning is socially embedded. And that is a relational activity and that can never happen alone. And I think that's something that often in the reform sector, the feedback as well kids are just going to be on



their own learning at their own pace now. Really learning is a social activity. It only happens in relation. Next that it's personalized, relevant, and contextualized. And I don't mean personalized meaning self paced. It's personalized to the unique needs and aspirations and strengths of that learner, that it is relevant to their learning journey, their ultimate learning journey. And it's contextualized to that learning journey itself. The fourth one is that it's open walled, that they, all these sites that are in the network, acknowledge that learning happens, anytime, anywhere. And the real work is how do you identify that the learning is happening? How it is personalized, relevant contextualized to the learner, and then how do you credential it. And the last that it's competent competency based, that it's not a set of standards, that learners are achieving that it's, you know, the knowledge, the skills and the dispositions that are important to that learner's journey. And that is done in a company based and displayed in any way that fits that learner. So we at education reimaged, really attempt to connect all of these organizations, learn from one another in different programs, and then advanced practice at those sites, all the sites that are within the network.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 16:18

That is amazing. And those five foundational principles. Yes, it was like Mic drop, yes. But bottom line, but so pulling that together? If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for our educational system? I mean, that's so much. How would you maybe synthesize that and wish for our system as a whole?

Alin Bennett 16:51

It would be the magic wand would be the mindset shift for all of those who have the impact in power to allow systems to develop. And that mindset, mindset shift would allow them to either acknowledge that their system can't be, you know, reiterated to meet that mindset, or, and then just get out of the way let new systems be built, or that allow them to build those systems with the learner at center. So, you know, the magic wand will be that one wish is that the purpose of education is learning, and that the learner is at the center of that. And you don't focus on school systems, you don't focus on teacher effectiveness. You don't, you don't focus on those things when it's the learners job to do the learning. And you just have to create the conditions for that learner to do their best work, and just get out of that learner's way, and just be a consultant more than a manager for a job.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 17:52

Yeah, that is such a paradigm shift. I love your magic wand. So anybody that's listening today, whether it's a parent, educator, educators, school administrator, business person, what is one baby step, one little piece of activism, people could take immediately to start to head us more in that direction of students at the center, and students were where the resources are going versus, like you said, teacher training and new structures for the school.

Alin Bennett 18:26



Build coalition within your community. If you have any apprehensions or displeasure with your current current system, do your best to create a coalition. And I'm saying this even more coming out of the pandemic. We are seeing more and more cooperative learning organizations come about throughout this country because people are just feeling disenfranchised by their current education system. And those allow you to do two things that will either allow you to advocate for change within the system, if that's the baby step you you feel like will be more most impactful to your community or it'll allow you to create your own system. If you have enough, folks, we were just talking the other day education reimaged with a gentleman who is I think he has if you can find 12 families, we will find you a way to design and credential your learning. Just get us 12 families and we will do this for you. And I think that's a that's a baby step. But it's also a huge message to those with no interest in changing the current system. That if we can find ways to do it without you. And if you don't change, we can make change. You know, it is about as grassroots as I think you can get if you just organize your community.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 19:54

Absolutely, listeners I'd love to have you just type into the chat. What's one step you can take toward finding a like minded person to start that creating of a coalition, because if you're here, obviously, you're about activism. So type into the chat and spark some ideas, is we're gonna head over to the live chat in just a second. And we're gonna keep this conversation going. And Alin can field specific questions of yours as well. But before we head over there Alin, what resources we're going to have, we do have education reimaged on our website, so that people can click on it and see more information. But what would be some specific tools or resources that you'd want them to know that you have, or that are out there in a larger context?

Alin Bennett 20:45

Yeah, so I think the one of the biggest ways that you could connect with our community and get some of those resources is become a member of the Learning Lab, the Learning Lab is the network of practitioners and building leaders and sort of activists and advocates who have gone through that shared language and distinction process around what we mean by learner centered education. And there are numerous opportunities to engage with and join that lab, through some of the trainings that we offer through education reimaged. You can also access hundreds and hundreds of single individual entire sites, entire districts, and sometimes even states who are moving towards this. So you can just really listen to some great stories of people saying how they are participating and living education in a completely different way and supporting, learning that is supported, organized, and credentialed and completely different ways. So that's, that's through our magazine called Voyager our e-magazine called Voyager. And you can read any of those. And that's just a wealth of resources of practices, and systems and structures that are in place that could be that you can learn from, from other sites. Some of the other resources is just the actual map of all of the numerous sites across the country that are part of our network, that in case you have ever want to do learning from any of those sites, you know, obviously post pandemic, if you are in a region where you can go visit Iowa big or a met San Diego, or up for



learning in Vermont, you know that you would be able to contact them. So there's access to that network as well. But I would say it's that first one would be the would be the best entry point is come join the Learning Lab orientation, which would be a springboard for way much more engagement, including what we call immersive learning exchanges, where practitioners from the learner centered movement, just do shared learning at a given site to find new understandings provide feedback to different learner centered sites. And then leadership training in if you would like to be a more transformative leader in the learner centered movement. There's offerings that would help you support that to just strengthen the activist muscle in your body through a certain lens of transformative leadership.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 23:39

Wow, that's loaded. And I know Voyager guys, you can subscribe. It, it's in my inbox. Every time it comes out. It's right there. So subscribe, and then it shows up in and you can take a break and get re inspired by all the examples of what's going on. So I encourage you to look at the Learning Lab, look at all the different pieces and pick one today that you're going to follow up on just so you don't lose the momentum. And to not lose the momentum right now I'd like you to go to the bottom of your screen and click where it has the Facebook Live and meet Alin and me over there and Alin can field your questions. Alin, thank you for all that you're doing as an activist and for being a part of our summit.

Alin Bennett 24:25

Well, thank you so much. And I look forward to seeing you all on the other side on Facebook Live and I'm just really excited to answer some of the questions and just share some more learning with you. Thank you for having me.