



EDUcation Unscripted & Xplored Transcript

Episode 1: Who We Are and What We Are Building

Kari Vogelgesang (00:07):

Welcome to Education Unscripted & Xplored with Kari and Mark. Two educators having real conversations about the complex and ever-evolving world of our PK through 12 schools, universities, and communities. We draw from experience, research, and candid conversations to uncover what's working, what's not, and where greater effort and resources are needed. Join us as together we explore the educational systems our communities need and deserve. Please note that the opinions and perspectives that are shared on this podcast do not necessarily represent those of the University of Iowa. Welcome to our first episode of Education Unscripted & Xplored. I'm super excited to get this going, Mark.

Mark McDermott (00:54):

Very excited.

Kari Vogelgesang (00:55):

Very excited. We've been waiting for this all of our lives.

Mark McDermott (01:00):

This is the moment...

Kari Vogelgesang (01:02):

To talk about education on a podcast. We are really excited to be here with all of you today. This first episode in our first season, we are really just going to kind of set the groundwork for why we're here, what we hope to talk about, how we hope to engage with our audience, and give you a little bit of background information about us personally and also our professional lives, our professional journeys, and kind of what brought us here today. So I don't know, Mark, do you want to get going and just kind of tell everyone a little bit about yourself and why you thought it was a good idea to join me on this podcast?

Mark McDermott (01:44):

Well, I'm still trying to decide. No, I'm very- We're doing it out. No, I'm very excited. I think this is going to be a great opportunity for us to have conversations that are probably reflecting a little bit the types of things that we're thinking about here in our jobs at the College of Ed, and give us an opportunity to hear from others what they might be curious about, what they're wondering about. So I think it's always good to have conversations. I think both of us agree on that, that that's important and to be able to talk about things that are important to us and see what is of interest to the others out there.

Kari Vogelgesang (02:23):

Yeah, I agree. I think that some of the conversations I've particularly had with you probably, I mean, well, for a long time, we've known each other for a long time now, but I think particularly since COVID, when I'm in meetings with you, I tend to not only enjoy our conversations, but I feel like you oftentimes bring a different perspective to the table that I really appreciate and that challenges me sometimes. So I think this should be good because I think that we both have a really kind of strong and rich experience in the PK through 12 world, but we also have had quite the career now in higher education and particularly in teacher preparation. So I'm hopeful that we can come to the table and have really honest conversations about all of those experiences that we've had and engage with a variety of stakeholders and engage with our audience to kind of explore what's happened in education over time and what we've learned from different experiments in education in terms of policy, leadership, programming, curriculum, and then kind of where we're at today and where we're going in the future.

(03:48):

Those are all the things that I'm really thinking about right now. I think the other thing I'm really thinking about, and then I've had really good conversations with you about is how schools I think are often talked about and thought about as very separate from the community in which they serve. And I think this is a huge mistake. When people are talking about issues that a particular school is having, they only talk about that school and they don't talk about where the school is situated and acknowledge that the school is serving a population in the community and that oftentimes schools are just a reflection of things that are happening in the community and they ... And I feel like that's a conversation that I want to talk about and touch on basically at every single podcast.

Mark McDermott (04:45):

Yeah. I think that I would say one of the things that I think both of us would agree is great about our current positions. I think we're going to hear in a second about kind of our paths and progression. And I think for myself, I would guess it was similar for you. When I was teaching high school and I was sort of ... In the day-to-day of it, especially early in my career, I was very narrowly focused on that and I didn't even as a teacher necessarily have that big picture view like I could have and maybe should have. And

one of the things I love about my position now is I get to interact with a really wide range of educational stakeholders and get to hear different perspectives, but also get to hear not only different ideas, but different really exciting, unique, innovative things that are happening that we can share and then build on.

(05:38):

And I think that's ... I agree with you that we don't always have as big a picture of you sometimes as we need to. I think we also ... I think you and I share a desire to make sure that we're building on the strengths that are out there and finding the people who are doing the things that are really exciting, being honest about things that we need to work on and that are challenges, but also acknowledging that there's a lot of people doing really cool things and we want to try to find some of those people and talk about them and then hopefully build on those across the spectrum. Yeah.

Kari Vogelgesang (06:11):

We'll see. So tell us a little bit more about your position because I think that your position, talking about your position helps give a perspective in terms of what all of the different people that you do engage with on a daily, weekly, monthly basis, and how that informs kind of your thoughts and opinions about what's happening in education today.

Mark McDermott (06:35):

Yeah. So this is ... I tell everybody I have the best job in the world, and I mean that. I do feel good about what I get to do. My official title is Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education and Educator Preparation. And you know, Kari, how formal I am about titles, and I make everybody call me. No, he does. I'm constantly ... No, I mean, what that means is I get to oversee our teacher ed program. So we have a, I think, I'm a little biased, but I think we have a great teacher ed program where we're helping develop elementary teachers, secondary teachers, special ed teachers, all the different content areas. And I get to help oversee that. But then I also, we have two non-licensure programs that are involved in education, but don't require licensure like a teaching license. So I get to help with those.

(07:23):

And then I also get to help with our educator prep programs across campus. So different areas outside of just teacher ed and administrator prep. And so in those roles, obviously, you have to hear about things that are happening in different parts of education, but also you get to talk to people across the state and across the country who are doing it too. And so I know you probably get to engage in that in your position as well.

Kari Vogelgesang (07:47):

Yeah, I do. My current titles right now, I know I'm not much of a title person either. I think that's another thing that we have in common, but I am the director of the Baker Teacher Leader Center, and then I'm the director of professional development for the Scanlon Center for School Mental Health. And then we both have faculty positions and teacher education as well. But yeah, I think being in roles that we have is really ... It's something that I think about a lot because I think it gives us lots of opportunities to talk to a variety of people and not only get a variety of feedback and all different diverse perspectives, but it also I think allows me to be creative in ways that I might not be able to be in other roles or other positions. And what I mean by that is I think that oftentimes when I'm talking to people or groups of people across the state of Iowa and beyond, and I'm listening to their experiences and I'm listening to their perspectives, and then I can start to think of things to do in either of the centers in a really quick way to

start to address some of those needs or to take that idea that's going really, really, really well that somebody's sharing with me and try to copy that to some extent and build off of it in a way that's helpful for our educators here in the state of Iowa.

(09:24):

So I just feel like you, I feel so privileged to be in this position because of the creativity that it gives me, but also just the diverse experiences and perspectives that I'm able to gain in conversation on a daily basis. And I was an elementary school teacher for quite a while before I got my PhD and moved into higher ed. And I had a little bit of a subbing journey after I had my second child ... Well, my first child and my second child actually, I did some subbing so I could work part-time for a little while. So I subbed in secondary classrooms and that was interesting. So I feel like I've had like the whole

Mark McDermott (10:04):

... But you grew up with an educator in the family.

Kari Vogelgesang (10:08):

Yeah, just like you.

Mark McDermott (10:09):

Yeah.

Kari Vogelgesang (10:09):

Yeah. I think that that's not only an educator, but we both had coaches for fathers, which ... So lots of evenings were sitting around the table and I was listening to conversations about school board meetings and my dad was an athletic director and a coach and listening to other parents come to our house and have all kinds of complaints about whatever, whatever you can imagine, they were coming to my house and complaining. So I feel like we both were exposed to this life at a very young age. My grandpa was also a superintendent of schools and lots of different districts across the country too. So it's kind of like in the blood, I guess.

Mark McDermott (10:56):

Yep, yep. Same way here. We spent most of our time growing up either going to dad's classroom to play on the chalkboard or to go to the gym and hang out up there. So it was a good way to grow up. It really was.

Kari Vogelgesang (11:09):

Yeah, it really, really was. We used to play this game. There were four of us. I'm the youngest of four and I loved growing up on the weekends and all of the lights were off and so the high school would be really dark because we were there clearly was taking us at night. We were supposed to stay in the gym and like play basketball and stuff. And he probably was making us do a workout of some sort. I don't know. But we were pretty little, but we would play Cagney and Lacey. Do you remember this show? Yeah. And we would like hide from each other and spy on each other and be throughout the entire school building. And I would get so scared as a kid doing this, but yeah, it was good memories. It was like our second home, for sure. Okay. So I think the next thing that we, in this very first episode was not only to tell a little bit about who we are and kind of what brought us here, but also like what we're hoping this podcast provides to our audience.

(12:21):

What's happening now that we're kind of trying to respond to, and what are we hoping to start? I guess, what kind of conversations are we hoping to start? What are our

Mark McDermott (12:34):

Outcomes? That's

Kari Vogelgesang (12:36):

A true teacher right there.

Mark McDermott (12:37):

That was good. Yeah. Yeah. I'll start with the big picture. Because that's what I tend to do. I would say that one of my hopes would be as we have these conversations and as we start to bring in guests and we start to talk to people that are doing all these different things in education, there's this recognition, number one, this is a complex thing, right? I think that we say that and we don't sometimes just sort of say it and just move on, but I think there needs to be this recognition that there's a lot of nuance. There's a lot of complexity to this. This is why it's a challenge to learn to be an educator because it's not just learning to ... Or understanding the content, right? I taught high school science for a long time. It wasn't just I had to learn a bunch of biology and a bunch of chemistry that I could then just spout back to a whole bunch of high school students.

(13:35):

It was, I had to understand the content. I had to try to understand how human beings learn. I had to try to understand how human beings got along with each other. I had to try to understand how to set up the physical space in a classroom. I had to try to understand how to make sure kids weren't burning themselves or others in the lab. All these different things that were happening all at once with a group of teenage human beings, 20 or 30 of them. And you have to think about all of that. And so there's aspects of that that are fairly clear cut, right? There's certain things about teaching biology that this is the way that it is. There's a lot of that that's not clear cut. There are a lot of complexity, a lot of things all happening at once. And I think both of us recognize that's important to try to communicate to people.

(14:27):

That's not a cop out. That's not a way for us in teacher ed to say, "Well see, there's nothing we can do. It's so complex." It's a recognition. And I think hopefully in the conversations we have is that we help people see that, that sometimes there aren't real easy answers. And so we have to have conversations. And I think that's the second thing. I always use my wife as an example. I like her a lot. We don't agree on everything, believe it or not. There's a lot of things that she disagrees with me on. Most of the time it's what I'm wearing when I leave the house. But I use this with my students that it is the, I think Aristotle said, it's the mark of an educated mind to entertain an idea without agreeing with it. And I think the longer you're around others in education, the longer I'm around my wife ... We had to learn as we were together for a while that we weren't going to agree on everything and we weren't going to convince the other one that they had to agree with us.

(15:25):

But we were able, we're more able now than when we first got married to have conversations in which we disagree. And I think that's a really important skill. And to be honest, I don't think that there's enough of that in the world today. And I hope ... I think like you said earlier, Karen, you and I don't

always see the world the same way. We have conversations that we respect each other's opinions. We don't necessarily come to a conclusion that we both agree on, but we allow the other person to say out loud what they think. And I hope that that's part of what we get to do with this.

Kari Vogelgesang (15:55):

Yeah. I 100% agree. I think I also just, I can't help but piggyback off of and also reiterate how complex it really is. I think I agree with you that, and probably every profession is way more complicated than what anybody else would know or understand unless they were living in it. But yeah, I mean, I think, again, I'm probably a little bit biased here, but I think our profession is maybe even a little bit more complex because we are helping care for and educate very children and adolescents and that can't be taken lightly. I mean, it's a very serious, big responsibility. And when you're doing that, there are all different kinds of factors that you have to consider and you have to be really respectful of in terms of the child's culture, their family interests and likes and their religious background and all different kinds of things that you need to think of when you're setting up your classroom and your school community.

(17:14):

And so it isn't just about the content. We also know that, and this has been proven time and time and time again, that you can't just teach academics. That is not how it works. If you are not also attending to and thinking about the child as a whole, which includes their family, then the extent to which they're going to be able to come to class and be prepared to actually learn to read and write and do math and understand math and science is limiting. It's not that they can't learn, it's that you're limiting their potential when you're not considering the whole picture or the whole child. And that's complicated and it takes some time and training and practice to coaching in order to be able to do that for certain. I also am always, and I know you know this about me, I'm fascinated by systems and how systems are set up and how systems, and particularly school systems, are linked to community systems and expectations.

(18:18):

And I'm not even criticizing that. That's just natural. That's how humans have operated and work. I just think it's interesting to unpack those systems and pick them apart and think about like who they're benefiting and who they're not benefiting. And I've always been interested in kind of messing with the bell schedule a little bit. And again, there's no like perfect solution here. I do know that chronic absenteeism is another interest of mine. And we've thought about structuring schools in different ways to engage families and students in a more palatable ways, stuff like this. And again, these are just conversations. There's no perfect solution out there or necessarily one's better than the other. You have to think about that community's unique context and needs to make these types of decisions. Yeah.

Mark McDermott (19:17):

Love it. And I think the other thing, one of the other things that is really unique when we talk about educators and we talk about this profession in general is it's one of the few professions that almost everyone else has had experience with, right? So everybody, most everybody was a student. Most everybody went through school. That's not necessarily true about doctors or lawyers, right? I don't go to the doctor and assume that I know what it's like to be a doctor because I've never experienced that. People have experienced school at least 1180 days a year from about pre-kindergarten through 12th grade for sure. And so one of the things that's interesting about our profession is that a lot of people feel they have ideas about it and they do have ideas. I shouldn't say they feel it. They have ideas about it because they've experienced learning and not just the teachers, not just the educators.

(20:15):

And that's a different aspect that we sometimes have to think about. And we talk about that with our pre-service teachers. And then the other thing, building off what you said, if it's okay for us to tell stories once in a while on here, Kari, I don't know what the rules are, but we're going to see what

Kari Vogelgesang (20:31):

Happens. I'm definitely going to tell a few stories. They're all going to be about you,

Mark McDermott (20:34):

But ... Yeah, I'm going to see what I can come up with. We talk a lot too about the only experience that we know for 100% and with 100% accuracy is our own, right? We know what our experience has been and we understand what we've been through and we understand what works for us and what doesn't. The hard part about teaching is you're not teaching yourself. You're teaching other human beings who have had different experiences. I always tell this story to our college kids and just at Mac Valley, Macoco Valley the other day, talking to a group of juniors and seniors. I told them the story about my very first year of teaching, I was teaching and coaching at New Hampton and I was coaching ninth grade girls basketball, right? And so we were getting ready for our first road trip and we were going to walk on.

(21:24):

Well, when I was an athlete, right, very high level football player at Division three Cornell College. I've seen

Kari Vogelgesang (21:30):

Pictures. That was a joke.

Mark McDermott (21:31):

That was a joke. I can't see when we're on the pocket. So when I was an athlete in high school and in college, for me to get ready for a game, I wanted it silent. I had my little walk, man, I had my REO Speedwagon Greatest Hits cassette.

Kari Vogelgesang (21:48):

Wow.

Mark McDermott (21:48):

I went all by myself.

(21:49):

Yes, that got me ready. I wanted to be by myself, listening to music. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to interact. I wanted it silent, right? That's how I got ready to compete and to perform. So I naturally assumed when I was coaching ninth grade girls basketball that the best way for them to get ready was to be silent and not talk. So we had an hour and 20 minute bus trip from New Hampton to walk on and I told those girls we will be silent on the bus. There will not be any talking because obviously that was going to get them ready to play.

Kari Vogelgesang (22:21):

This was before you had a teenage girl of your own.

Mark McDermott (22:23):

This was well before I had a teenage daughter, but believe it or not, we lost to walk on by 20. And luckily, one of the girls after the game came up to me and said, "Coach, I don't think that was the best way for us to get ready to play basketball." And I always remember that. That was like a moment in my educational career as a 22 year old first year teacher thinking, "You know what, you're right." That was the first time it hit me that other people didn't experience the world exactly the same way I did and didn't get ready to compete or didn't get ready to learn or maybe didn't even view learning or competing the same way I did. That's what's tough about teaching, right? I'm sure you had that experience where at some point it sort of hits you like, wait a second, these students don't see the world the same way I do.

(23:10):

They haven't had the same experiences, they haven't said ... And the more places we go, I think for both of us, as we went to different jobs and different positions, that you just, you learn that more and more and more because you're experiencing a wider variety of people. And I think that's important to think about.

Kari Vogelgesang (23:27):

I do. I think it's really important. And yes, I think that all of those experiences are really important. I hope that our teacher ... And I know that one of the things I love about our teacher education program is how committed we are to putting them in very different placements so that they can have a variety of experiences. I think that's really critical for any teacher education program because they will inevitably encounter different types of families and students and school environments that they're going to learn from. Even if they aren't environments or situations that they want to be in when they become a full-time teacher, they're still going to learn a lot from those situations. So many of our students come in and say, "I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher. I'm just going to be a kindergarten teacher." How many times does it happen that they then get placed in a fifth, sixth grade classroom and then they realize like, "Wow, no, actually this is for me."

(24:27):

" And it's just because of the variety, the diversity and the experience, the diverse experiences that they have as they're growing into becoming their authentic teaching selves.

Mark McDermott (24:39):

Did you know what you wanted to do exactly with the rest of your life when you were-

Kari Vogelgesang (24:43):

I still don't know for sure what I want to do with the rest of it. No. I think we both have been talking about this a lot in meetings this past year, your youngest, he's a freshman this year at Iowa and my youngest is finishing up at Kirkwood and starting a career as a horticulture scientist and I'm home alone with my cat. And so I feel like we're always evolving and thinking about what's next. Where do I go next with this career that I've built? What's next? Yeah. So fortunately, I think we've both been, like we've talked about, fortunate enough to be exposed to so many different opportunities and different kinds of situations that we'll see. We'll see. Maybe this podcast will bring us some kind of major sponsorship and then we'll just go on the road and be podcasters for the rest of our lives.

Mark McDermott (25:40):

We could do that. Yeah,

Kari Vogelgesang (25:42):

Maybe that's what's next.

Mark McDermott (25:43):

I told you I've been practicing by listening to lots of different podcasts and I'm trying out different things. So we'll see.

Kari Vogelgesang (25:49):

Look at you and try hard. Oh, Mark, Mark.

Mark McDermott (25:56):

Yeah, you know.

Kari Vogelgesang (25:58):

Okay. Well, what's coming up? So we don't know actually. This is a great question. Throw that up. Let's talk about this right now. Actually, we have. We have talked a little bit about different kinds of episodes, topics, guests that we are hoping to explore and guests to have on in some future episodes. I know one of the things that we talked about this morning was addressing chronic absenteeism. That's a big one for me and thinking about why are kids not wanting to go to school? And COVID really broke that crack wide open and we are starting to recover from that. We know that the numbers are kind of trending in a therapeutic direction, which is good, but still a lot of work to do there. Another one we talked about was rural education. Do you want to talk about that?

Mark McDermott (26:55):

Sure. Well, I mean, both of us I think have experienced growing up in smaller schools and in situations like that, I think the kind of complex, dynamic interplay between the community and the schools and the unique characteristics, the things that are unique about growing up or learning in those sorts of environments versus what are the things that overlap with other types of learning environments. And even as you look at ... One of the things that kind of building on that idea of learning in rural spaces or learning in urban spaces or geographically different or geographically diverse spaces, I think I'm always trying to think a little bit about how are we preparing our future teachers to teach in the future, right? I always tell this story that impacted me. It was right before COVID. I'd gone to a conference at the Ohio State University and one of those

Kari Vogelgesang (27:58):

Big- Oh geez. Oh boy. Uh-oh.

Mark McDermott (28:02):

One of us Notre Dame fan doesn't like Ohio State after last year's national championship game, but we're moving on. So I was at this conference and there was a guy speaking and his title was educational evangelist for Google, right? That was a pretty cool title, but also kind of interesting that Google would have a position like that. And I always remember, I told this story, I'm sure you've probably heard this, that he held up his cell phone and he said, "I have a daughter that's going into kindergarten this year."

And he said, he's pointing to his cell phone, he said, "This is the worst piece of technology she will ever use. Everything she uses the rest of her life will be better and will be more advanced and will be faster." And he said, "My question is, is her kindergarten teacher teaching her and preparing her for a world in which everything's getting faster and better or is her kindergarten teacher teaching her for the world the kindergarten teacher lived in?"

(29:05):

"That kind of hit me. I was like, "That's a really good question." We think a lot about innovative, exciting things that are happening right now and learning. It's hard to say yes, but these students that we're teaching, when we're preparing elementary teachers, they're going to go out and teach five year olds who are going to live in a world that's going to be unbelievably different by the time those five year olds or 20 year olds, let alone 30 year old, right? And how do we set up teacher ed in a way where we're addressing that and not just sort of recreating the things that work for us because they work for us kind of a thing.

Kari Vogelgesang (29:43):

Yeah. Well, and while we're still making sure that we, because that's what's difficult about what we're doing too, right? I mean, we've both together, particularly this last one letter, most recent accreditation process, and And it's something that even, gosh, is it ever seven years, right? Seven years. Even seven years before- Still not done actually. I know. We still have another round. You reminding us. But people are always like, "Well, why can't you just add this course? Or why can't you just change this in the curriculum or change that?" Well, yes, we're trying to change and evolve. Of course, we're doing that all the time to keep pace and to think about the kind of teacher we need to prepare for the future while also still making sure that we are meeting the expectations for accreditation or just that those aren't as flexible and aren't as nimble and easily moved or changed.

(30:48):

I think it's another piece of the puzzle that people don't often think about when they're thinking about teacher education programs for certain. Yeah. There's a few other things I know that we've talked about that I'm excited to address. One is AI and education for sure. Another one, we both are kind of sports junkies and I've always been interested to talk about how sports is so embedded in our schools, both in K through 12 and at our universities that it's very different than other countries and the benefits and then kind of the downside of some of that for sure. I

Mark McDermott (31:29):

Don't want to neglect the fact that I was also a swing choir member and I was in one play. And so not just sports, Kari. I was a-

Kari Vogelgesang (31:38):

You were just like the all around person!

Mark McDermott (31:39):

In my talk the other day, I had to explain, I was not a Renaissance man, but I took piano lessons for two weeks. Gayle Lundock, who she's listening, the nicest lady in Trayr taught me piano lessons. And after two weeks she said, "Mark, if you worked as hard at piano as you do at football, you could be just as good at piano as you are at football." And I said, "Mrs. Lundock, if I liked piano, as much as I liked football, I might work at it about the ... " And she said, "Well, you're probably right." And then she

Kari Vogelgesang (32:10):

Said- Yeah, but that's really exactly right. That's part of it. It has to be both. You're not going to keep doing it if you don't like it. But Mark, I took piano for years, Patty Niehouse, if you're out there. Thank you. Thank you for all of your patience. Played the saxophone. Guess what? I was Charlotte in Charlotte's Web, Mark. Wow. Okay. Okay. I, too, can do both.

Mark McDermott (32:36):

See, I actually-

Kari Vogelgesang (32:38):

Arts, sports.

Mark McDermott (32:39):

This is a true story. I don't know how honest we have to be on this podcast, but when I was at Cornell College for my undergraduate, Harvard of the Midwest, I was taking a class called Music Appreciation and it was a required fine arts course. I'm not making this up. I was so bad at clapping rhythms that I had to go in for a remedial clapping session on a Friday afternoon with Dr. Marty Hearn and he had to teach. I was a 22 year old kid, 21 year old. I was paying tuition to learn how to clap because I was so bad at rhythms. So that might have contributed to the piano playing.

Kari Vogelgesang (33:19):

That has really stuck with you too, hasn't it?

Mark McDermott (33:21):

Yeah, not that it still bothers me 30 years later that I was ... No.

Kari Vogelgesang (33:25):

Well, that's also going to be ... We're going to revisit that in this later on in this podcast. We're going to have another session for you. Well, I really appreciate this first time that we've had together, Mark.

Mark McDermott (33:40):

Interesting conversation.

Kari Vogelgesang (33:41):

Interesting already. We really do want to just thank you for listening to the Education Unscripted & Xplored podcast with Kari and Mark. Be sure to follow and share this podcast with colleagues and friends who care about the future of education and our communities. Until next time....

Mark McDermott (34:00):

You stay classy, educators.

Kari Vogelgesang (34:03):

And we're forever cheering you on. Bye-bye now.

This transcript was exported on Jan 07, 2026 - view latest version [here](#).