



Education Unscripted & Xplored Transcript

Episode 3 | Teacher Preparation: Developing the Next Generation of Sustainable, Healthy Educators

Kari Vogelgesang (00:07):

Welcome back to EDUcation Unscripted and Xplored with Kari and Mark, where we talk honestly about what's working, what's uncertain, and what's emerging in K-12 and higher education.

Mark McDermott (00:19):

We pull from research practice and lived experience to make sense of a profession that's changing fast, sometimes faster than our systems can keep up with.

Kari Vogelgesang (00:28):

And today, we are digging into teacher preparation, and this is your area of expertise. Dr. McDermott, We have a guest with us today, too, and Mark's going to introduce him here shortly, but I have to talk a little bit about Mr. McDermott because he is our expert here in the College of Education when it comes to teacher preparation. He is our associate dean for undergraduate education and educator preparation. And anytime [00:01:00] anyone has a question about teacher preparation and what we need to be doing in our teacher preparation program, and can we do this, are we going to be breaking the rules, or how can we switch courses around, or anything that has to do with how we're preparing the next generation of teachers. Mark is our go-to guy. So you are also here as one of our experts. And joining us is one of your good friends.

Mark McDermott (01:29):

Absolutely. My friend Elliott going to, I think I was supposed to say, Kari, that the quick reminder, these views are expressed here. They are our own, not those of the University of Iowa or the College of Education. But I think the fact that you said I'm an expert is the view of the No, I'm just kidding.

Kari Vogelgesang (01:44):

No, you're right. You're right. I stepped over that. But yes, this is very true that these are our own. These are Mr. McDermott's and Dr. Elliott's views of teacher preparation.

Mark McDermott (01:58):

Well, we are excited to have Elliott with us today. Elliott, I think we had to reschedule this a couple of times, and so I was hoping he wasn't getting the wrong idea that we didn't want to talk to him, but we thought that it would be a great opportunity with this particular topic. Obviously, Kari and I both have some experience here at a larger research, one type institution that has a fairly large number of students in lots of different areas in teacher ed. And then to also maybe talk with someone who's at [00:02:30] a different sized institution and maybe a little bit of a different type of an institution. So Elliott is a colleague of mine at Luther College. I'm going to let him introduce himself here in a second. But I will say, and I mean this in all sincerity, not just saying it because staring at me from the computer screen here.

Elliott and I have worked together in a lot of different ways. We are both part of I-A-C-T-E, which is our sort of statewide organization for folks that are involved in teacher education. We've been on some visits together, [00:03:00] worked together in that capacity. And it has been clear to me as I have worked with Elliott that not only is he a great ambassador for Luther College and the things that he does there, a real leader for them, but this is really important to him. This is a topic that I know he cares deeply about. He cares about the students that he works with, and I tend to think we have a fairly similar view on some of these things, but also I think we experience it from a slightly different perspective because of the institutions that we're at. So first, Elliott, thank you very much for being [00:03:30] with us today. And secondly, if you want to maybe introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about yourself, please. Yeah,

Elliott Johnson (03:35):

Sure. Thanks so much for having me. This is a great opportunity to talk about, like you said, Mark, one of my great passions, preparing future educators to support the young minds of children out there. So I'm here at Luther College, it is my seventh year, and I am the head of the program. I'm a trained elementary school teacher. I taught 12 years across multiple buildings in multiple parts of the country, both rural and small communities at the same time. More urban schools with large populations of immigrant students. And so I like to think that my experiences help our candidates be prepared for the classroom. So being able to talk today with you all is a great opportunity, and I look forward to doing it. So thank you for having me.

Kari Vogelgesang (04:23):

Well, thanks for taking the time to come on with us. I really appreciate you joining us today. Like Mark mentioned, we had a really difficult time getting this schedule because I know how busy you really are. So thank you, Elliott. But I think you kind of started this conversation for us already. You were talking about how all of your experiences, you hope all of those experiences that you've had as a K through 12

or an elementary classroom teacher helps prepare the next generation of classroom teachers. And I agree with you. I think that the more experiences that we have as teachers helps the next generation that we're preparing. But one thing that I think we all know happens when teachers leave the teacher preparation program and they go out into the classroom, we have this common theme where teachers across the United States say something to the tune of nothing truly prepares you for the classroom. Most teacher preparation programs aren't going to prepare you for the truly disruptive things that happen or that you'll face out in the real world, meaning the classroom. So I think I'd like to start there. What do you guys have to say about that? Do you think there's truth in that?

Elliott Johnson (05:42):

Absolutely. I'll jump in. Absolutely right. You can read all the papers, you can read all the books, you can write all the hypothetical lesson plans. But until you get our candidates out into the real world and as they take on their own classrooms, they're interacting with real people and real kids who have real feelings and have real opinions, and you can't know how to manage those and build relationships with them without connecting with the students that you have in your own classrooms.

Mark McDermott (06:16):

Yeah, I think one of the things that I'm lucky enough to get to teach a class that is the first class our secondary ed majors take in our program, and a couple of things we really try to emphasize with them. Number one, my experience, Elliott talking about his experience carriers, our experiences as teachers are our experiences as teachers. And so I think they've taught us something. I think over the several years maybe that we've done this, we've learned some things both from teaching elementary students or high school students or now our college students, but we as the instructors have to remember our experience is unique to us and we haven't experienced every possible scenario or situation that is out there, and there's no way that we can prepare our students for all of those scenarios and situations. So one of my colleagues, Travis Henderson, that teaches with me, he always uses this idea of we're going to try to give you a compass, not a map, right?

We can't tell you exactly what's going to happen, nor can we tell you exactly that if you do this, this is going to be the outcome. This is the perfect strategy to help with this situation. This is perfect. We can't do that. What we can do is try to give you some ideas that seem to have worked in the other situations similar to probably the ones that you're going to be in. We can help you think about how you might apply them to the situations you find yourself in. And I think really important in my mind is we can help you learn to ask the right questions. I hope what you're always doing as a teacher, and I hope what I'm always doing as a teacher educator is encouraging all of our students to think about this as there are really important questions I have to answer every day when I'm teaching sometimes big picture for a semester or for a year about the way that I'm teaching, and I'm constantly looking for answers to those questions that will result in the most effective learning environments for the human beings I'm working with.

The answers are going to change a little bit based on the human beings that I'm working with, but the sources of information, the [00:08:30] places I can go to find some of those answers, the things I have to think about my experience, those are things I can draw on as we're going through that. So I think Elliott and I would agree that it would be absolutely false for us to say, when you get done with this class or when you get done with this program, you will be 100% ready to be a teacher. I hope I've done this for 30 years. I tell my students I started teaching when I was 12. That's a lot. But I've done this for a long time. I still go to class every Monday night and I learn something new. I figure something out. I'm not

sure about something, and I'm having to, and I hope I never get to a point where I feel like I've got this. It's done.

Kari Vogelgesang (09:09):

Yeah. I also don't you, because we've all heard this comment a lot. So this isn't surprising to me when I see this pop up on social media or when I read about it in an article or something, as if people are shocked by this. And I think that in every profession where you need licensure to do your job, whether it's a doctor or a lawyer or a business professional, there's a gradual release in college like you in any kind of a preparation program where you're learning frameworks, systems, structures, policies, laws that help you and inform you to make really good choices once you're out. But again, until you actually start doing that job by yourself and you're in the profession, you're never going to know everything until you are never going to know everything, period. But there's always going to be, there's an on-ramp to it. So then this leads me to kind of the second part of this question, which is a lot of times we get people who focus on that, well, they don't prepare me enough in classroom management. That's like the number one thing, right? Behaviors. But what are we doing really well? What do people not talk about that we do a really good job of that you think across accredited teacher preparation programs?

Mark McDermott (10:38):

Well, I think number one, I think that we focus on learning. I think what we do sometimes is we do a good job of helping students see that yes, there are things that I as the adult in the classroom or I as the professional in the classroom need to do and have to do. But what is most important in that classroom is that the people that are there to learn have an opportunity to learn. And I think sometimes even shifting the terminology we use is helpful. And I think we think about that as teacher preparers, and I think we talk about that honestly with our students. I think that we give them a sense of, you've been through this as a learner, you've been a student for your whole life. Now your role is going to change and your focus is going to change, but the goal of your classroom is the same goal that you had as an individual in a classroom to create opportunities for learning.

And so I think it's sometimes nice to be able in our roles to step back and be able to look at it big picture and think about those things. I'd say the second thing we do is we form really strong collaborations with stakeholders that help us answer some of those important questions. I would argue, I hope Elliott would agree with this, but I think the fact that we have organizations in ways for those of us in the state of Iowa that are different, I think we have about 30 teacher prep programs total in our state.

We don't get together and have this very competitive discussion about how we're doing a better here at Iowa than LA is doing. We get together and we have conversations that try to help all of us do a better job of helping the teachers that come to our institutions. And I think we feel that way that we can learn from each other. We're not competing against each other, and I feel like we feel that way with our K 12 partners. Our job is to help each other out, so let's work together. So those are a couple of things.

Elliott Johnson (12:50):

I would agree with that, Mark. I think the effort that we put in to model collaboration to our candidates is really, really key. Trying to figure out what's going to support our candidates before they go out into schools, helping them really understand that they're not in it by themselves, that the students that they have, even for that one year in the classroom, it's not the only ones responsible for helping those students learn that they've got other specialists in the buildings, the districts even back at their home

institutions that they graduated from to say, Hey, I need some help with this. Can you help me understand what might be best for our students? And we do that really, really well in preparing them. I think we also really prepare, we have high standards for the content knowledge that our students need to know before going out. Our students know at the secondary level, they really know their history, their English, their math to teach effectively at the high school level, just like our elementary teachers know the parts of speech to teach students early on or the basic math facts that they get them ready to do that. So I think that's one of the key areas that I think we do really well before getting our early teachers out into the classrooms.

Kari Vogelgesang (14:16):

This is a great segue to Elliott, how teacher preparation programs do focus on that content knowledge and how important it's to have that as a foundation before you're going out in the classroom. What's interesting about this right now, particularly probably in the last almost 10 years, is we're starting, what we always know is that one of the biggest pieces of feedback that teachers across the nation, not just in Iowa, when you look at different surveys, we'll say to you, and I mentioned this before when I left the teacher preparation program, I wish I would've known more about classroom management. I wish I would've known more about how to navigate different kinds of challenging behaviors, both with students and with guardians, parents and guardians.

But what's interesting to me is then I think in the past, so we are our teachers telling us that, but then there are media outlets that are reporting that. There are groups of parents that are saying, that's none of your business. I just need you to teach my student math. I need you to teach my child reading. So how do teacher preparation programs, [how are we navigating that collectively where we know we do need to teach in order for our teachers to be successful? I mean, let's just face it, 45% of our teachers leave the classroom within the first five years. That's a statistic that's been around for a while now. And one of the things that they point to is behaviors. So how do we get people to understand it? It can't just be about content knowledge.

Elliott Johnson (15:55):

I think it's more conversation, right? We right now focus so much as a society. On the quantifiable pieces, you threw out the statistic of 45%, but you can't quantify the relationship that you build with students and with parents and other colleagues in a building. I can't say that over the last couple of emails with Mark, my relationship with Mark has grown only 6%. It's not possible. I think it would be more than 6% was

Kari Vogelgesang (16:31):

Going to say, you need to improve your email style. Elliott,

Elliott Johnson (16:35):

He's referring to mine. You understand? Yeah. Well, maybe we would get a faster response from you, and it would be higher. Oh, okay. That's fair. But thank you. So the point is that we cannot improve those things without having more opportunities to interact. We can't solely focus on test scores or pass [00:17:00] rates. We have to focus on the relationships that we have between teachers and students and families, knowing that it's a team effort.

Mark McDermott (17:12):

I think there's two really important, I mean, there's lots of important things there. Two things I would emphasize. One, I don't know where I picked this saying up, but I've heard the saying that the best French horn player is not always the best French horn teacher.

I know nothing about playing French horn or any other instrument, but I think that applies to everything. The best basketball player is not always the best basketball coach. The best mathematician is not always the best math teacher. And I think what that reminds us is that there are so many different aspects to the ability to [00:18:00] help another human understand information, concepts, content that are beyond the content itself. That is an absolutely important part of it, that I understand the content well and deeply, and how it's connected to other things. There's also, I need to understand how students in general learn. I need to understand how behaviors, individual behaviors, what they're communicating to me, group behaviors, how those get impacted and shaped by being in a group, the individual aspect of one-on-one discussion and conversation with a human being versus the social aspect of being in a classroom, the systems that are involved, all the things.

That's why I would argue vehemently and do argue that it is not something that can be learned in a year or two. Learning to be a teacher involves learning content. It involves learning some psychology, some developmental ideas, some biology, some relational ideas, some classroom management type things, all of that. And it involves learning about those things and then applying those, which does not happen quickly. And I think that's important. Remember that there's those aspects and being honest and talking about that with whatever stakeholder group. The other thing, and I use this dumb example, I hope it makes my point, my dad still makes fun of me. When I was in first grade, we were taking the Iowa test of basic skills. I don't know how many, if you took those, those were a stress inducing scenario for young Mark McDermott, right? We're doing the math part.

My dad's a math teacher in high school. I'm feeling a lot of pressure to perform well. There happens to be a bee in the room in the North Tama classroom in first grade. So I'm pretty concerned about this bee, and I'm not paying much attention to my Iowa test of basic skills, worried about this bee. And then Mrs. Volant, my very caring teacher, sees that I'm very upset about the bee and decides that the way she's going to handle that is she's going to sit beside me for the entire test. Now, I like Mrs. Volant, but she didn't realize that she was nearly as intimidating as the bee, if not more. And I was more nervous by Mrs. Volant sitting there. So now I had Mrs. Vol and the bee in the room as I'm trying to take the test, right? Long story short, this is the part my dad continues to remind me about...40 plus years later, I was on the 14th percentile on math in first grade on the Iowa test, the basics. So I didn't do very well. I think my understanding of math was a little better than the 14th percentile at that point, but there were a whole bunch of other factors that were impacting the way I could demonstrate it at that moment in time in that classroom. So if all you looked at from that scenario was this is what Mark got for a score on this test at that time, and said he doesn't understand math, I think you'd be, I am not saying I was a genius in math, but I think I was better than I demonstrated. And to me, that shows that's a pretty unique a bee gets in the room and scares a little wimpy kid, but it did make a difference.

That made a difference in my learning and my ability to show that learning. And we forget those things, and now multiply that by 30 kids in a classroom, and you're the teacher trying to help all those situations. So I think that's the complexity and the nuance. It would be great if all we had to do was figure out the absolute best strategy to help individuals learn math by doing very specific strategies. That's not reality, and I think we have to be honest about that, but I think we have to do a better job of communicating sometimes that those are the things we're trying to get, these people who are learning to be teachers to understand, and it's going to be different from me. I bet the three of you would've been less uptight about that B than I was, but I was uptight about the B. You guys might've reacted to it a little differently, and that's part of it, right?

Kari Vogelgesang (22:13):

It was a really good story, and it actually, I do think that it helped hit a point home about how complex it is when there's a teacher in a classroom with 30 different kids, with 30 different needs, and they're all coming to you at different levels, different experiences. They woke up in a different way that morning. They have different worries and struggles and challenges and celebrations that are coming into the classroom with them. There's more to it than what I think a lot of people recognize, and our teachers are out there just doing the absolute, to be honest with you, when we get these stats that are really sexy to people and get people's attention and emotions going, our teachers are out there doing a bang up job. When I'm going in and out of classrooms and schools across the state and across this nation, I am always floored by how well our teachers are adapting to all of the different challenges that are being flung at them every single second of the day. It's actually super inspiring, inspiring to me. There's one more thing that I think I would like to hit on before we wrap things up for the day. Recently, our federal government has removed education from its list of professional occupations, grouping teaching with dozens of fields that no longer qualify as professional degrees. I'm just curious, what do you two think this means when teaching is no longer recognized federally as a professional degree, does it mean anything for us? Are there in some maybe unintended consequences or maybe intentional consequences that are going to come along with this?

Elliott Johnson (24:08):

I think we need more people to understand really what it takes to be a teacher and the characteristics and the things, the examples that Mark throughout about a bee, how would anybody else handle that? Do they even think about needing to handle something like that? While people may view it as less of a profession because it's not considered professional, I don't know. But what I do hope people understand is really how important this profession is that families and communities realize that they need teachers for everything regardless of what's out there, where it may not be considered professional. And AI is continuing to develop and change so many professions, and it's absolutely true, but those are computer programs that have to be run by people at some point, and they have to learn how to do it, but you can't learn how to do it without teachers helping them navigate and see that.

I also hope that people understand that the teachers don't know everything. We all [00:25:30] have spent years in education and we still don't know everything. And to expect new teachers to know everything or put the pressure on them to know everything isn't appropriate, and for new teachers to know it's okay to say, I need help. I don't know this. Come observe and see what I'm doing. When I first started teaching, we had, I worked for a superintendent who had won superintendent of the years multiple times, and his key statement was, you can't teach if you can't manage, or if you don't manage, you can't teach. And it's totally true. To know how to help students be successful in the classroom is to know how to communicate with each other, to listen to one another. All of those things translate outside the classroom into the real world outside the classroom. And that's what we need people to understand, that teachers do.

Mark McDermott (26:30):

A couple things. This is an issue with not just teaching and education, but also nursing and some other of the health Alli Fields. That they're talking about changing these designations. Second thing would be in a very technical sort of way, this is a good example too of this. It's actually much more about impact on ability to take loans for graduate programs and things like that. And so from a very technical standpoint, the regulations that are being discussed are much more about financial aid and those sorts of things. I think the concern Kari and Elliott that comes up is if you don't read into all the specifics and the

technical ideas of what is it really about, the perception can be, oh, they're saying teaching is not a profession. And I think that's the concerning thing to me. And I would agree, number one with Elliott, I think we have to remind everybody sometimes that teachers can't do, they will do everything in their power to create the best learning environment, but they can't do everything at the same level.

They can't be a counselor at the level of a professional counselor. They can't be a mathematician at the level of a professional mathematician. They're trying really hard to do all of these things. I think that's what makes them professionals. But the other thing is, and I think this is a challenge of our career in general, and it's a challenge for us to teach teachers. Almost everybody on the planet at some point has been a student. And there's very few careers where the people you're interacting with often have been somehow engaged. You don't go to the doctor, I don't think you go to the doctor and assume you know how to be a doctor because you've been in medical clinics for eight hours a day for 13 years of your life. Most of us have been in schools, at least K through 12 schools for a long period of time.

So in some ways, there's this sort of assumption of, well, I know how to be a teacher. It can't be that hard because we've all been students. And I think getting people to realize there are a lot of things that happen outside of the time that you're in the school with the children that are really important that make this profession. There's a lot of things that we have to do in the big picture and in the one-on-one and all those sort of nuances and different things will help at least make the case. And to be honest, I think sometimes we as teachers have to do a good job of that. We have to remind people, I think sometimes we don't always do as great. I tell my students sometimes, I'm like, Hey, don't be one of those students that is talking about, oh, I like my education courses not as hard as my microbiology course. They're just as important as your microbiology course. And they might be complex in a different way. The content might be a different sort of content, but these are critically important. We have to act in a way sometimes as educators to remind people how critically important the things we have to think about, learn about, discuss, argue, debate, all those things are, and I think that's part of this conversation as well.

Kari Vogelgesang (29:48):

I agree with that. I appreciate both of you chiming in and giving your perspective on this because I do think it is a little bit of a sensitive topic right now. I will say this because I always have to get the last word in with Mark. I'm just teasing that everybody wants the highest quality teacher possible for their own child, and I hope it even goes beyond your own child. It goes to everybody in that school, and everybody in the community and across the nation. We want the highest quality teachers. We hear this all the time. We need better teachers. We need higher quality teachers. We hear this a lot. I don't think by deprofessionalizing, the profession is the way to get to these high quality teachers by saying to people, oh, well, you can get a teaching license in 18 months, or you can have a BA and then do some mentoring in a classroom and then as a mentee and then get a teaching license.

That is highly concerning to me, and I think it should be concerning to every single parent out there. Again, I want you to think about who is teaching your child and what kind of practice they've had and what kind of courses they've gone through. And not just about the content and not just about, not just about math and reading, but do they know anything about child development? Because trust me, you want your child's teacher to have had coursework, instruction, and practice and understanding how the brain works, understanding biology and child development, and not just your elementary teachers, but your high school teachers, your middle school teachers as well. So I am going to just take a strong stance on that. And as somebody who has dedicated my life to this profession, I am very passionate about this topic. I actually want to share a little bit of a story too,

Especially this is goes out to all of my elementary professionals out there. I think the elementary teachers, oftentimes, they get the worst rap when it comes to, oh, you're studying to be an elementary school teacher. Did you show up to class today and make a bulletin board? I mean, it's not that we don't talk about different fun things and projects that we can do with teachers or with our students once we're in the classroom. Of course we do that because we're trying to think of creative ways to engage students in learning. But it's much more than that. It's like some of the other topics that I was just referencing. And one day I was teaching here and I forgot that I had recess duty and it was a really cold day. And so even though I was an adult, I still texted my parents who lived here in Iowa City and I was like, you guys, mom, I have Reese's duty.

I forgot and I didn't bring a hat and I don't have gloves. So can one of you pop into my classroom and bring them to me? So my dad does it. He brings them to me. And my dad was also a high school teacher. He taught biology, and he was a coach and an athletic director. And it was funny because he came in and he gave me the mittens and hat, and I do kind of vaguely now remember him standing in the front corner of the room watching and observing as I'm kind of navigating kids to finish up a project and start to instruct how to get your hats. And I was teaching first grade at the time, your coats and your boots and everything on. And as he's leaving the class, he pulls me off to the side and he whispers to me, you couldn't pay me enough. And he actually inserted a word that I won't say, you couldn't blank pay me enough to be in this situation. And he just had a five minute little glimpse of what was going on and how a teacher was having to manage those 25 students. And so it is difficult. It's not something that you want anybody to just be able to walk in off the street and work with children in a way without having had some real education and practice doing it. So is there anything either one of you want to say before we wrap up today?

Elliott Johnson (34:07):

I just want to say thank you, great opportunity, but also just thank you for what you all are doing, the podcast. It's a great way to get the word out there about the work that we do in preparing candidates for teaching the future. So I want to thank you both.

Kari Vogelgesang (34:24):

Thank you, Elliott.

Mark McDermott (34:25):

Thanks for being here, Elliott, and thanks for what you're doing. And like I said, I appreciate the fact that all of us here in the state that are working on this, we want to work together and we want the best for the students that we're interacting with, but also for theirs. And I would say Kari, too, I think, and I point to a lot of the work you're doing in this regard because I know you are very interested in reaching out to our K 12 friends. I really feel like a lot of what we need to, as we look ahead, what we need to keep thinking about are what are those things we can do from us at higher ed and the teacher prep world with the K 12 partners during those first couple of years? There's some things that until you are doing them every day with a group of others, it's going to be impossible for you to know how to do 'em. Exactly. And so let's take advantage of the expertise of those of us teaching teachers and those of us that are in the field with teachers and work together. And I think that would be a great goal as we look ahead for teacher prep.

Kari Vogelgesang (35:31):

This transcript was exported on Feb 19, 2026 - view latest version [here](#).

100% agree. Yeah. Working really, really closely with them. Yeah. Well, thank you for coming on again, Elliott, and I really hope that you all have enjoyed this episode and we want to remind you that if you have any topics, questions, any kind of discussion that you would like to hear us talk through, then please feel free to reach out to us. You can reach us through the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, or the Baker Teacher Leader Center. Or you can just Google Mark McDermott. His phone number will pop up. I'll do that. Don't do that. Just call Mark

Mark McDermott (36:13):

And if this conversation resonated with you, we'd ask you to follow the podcast, share it with your colleagues, send us your questions or your stories.

Kari Vogelgesang (36:22):

Thanks for listening to EDUcation Unscripted and Xplored. We hope you continue to join this community of support and exploration. And as always, we're forever cheering you on one.