Katie: You're listening to Research and Action, episode 184.

Katie: Welcome to Research and Action, a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder, Research Director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

Katie: On this episode, I'm joined by Dr. David J Connor, a Professor Emeritus of Hunter College in the Learning Disabilities Program and the Graduate Center of the Urban Education Program of the City University of New York. He has taught in New York city for over 30 years, from high schoolers to doctoral students. Throughout his career, David has always been interested in issues of equality, particularly disability and race.

Katie: He is the author or editor of over a hundred articles and book chapters and nine books, most recent among them being DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory, co edited with Subini Annamma and Beth Ferri, Contemplating Dis/Ability in Schools and Society: A Life in Education, and the second edition of Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices, coauthored with Jan Valle. He's currently working on two co-edited books, the first with Beth Ferri, How Teaching Shapes our Thinking about Disabilities, Stories from the Field, consists of auto ethnographic accounts about how initial teaching experiences influenced the research agendas of career long educators. The second with Subini Annamma and Beth Ferri, DisCrit Expanded: Inquiries, Reverberations and Ruptures looks at new and innovative ways the theoretical framework of disability critical race theory is being used within the field of education.

Katie: Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, David.

David: Oh, you're welcome. I'm happy to be here.

Katie: So I was hoping we could dive in to some of your work in disability studies, and I always like to hear just a general overview of some of the things that you're working on. So what are some of the things that you're exploring in your work in disability studies?

David: Well, some of the work that I'm exploring at the moment, there are about three areas, and one of them is a followup to the book that I did with Beth Ferry and Subini Annamma, and it's called DisCrit Expanded. And so it's the second book on disability critical race theory. And the title is [inaudible 00:02:46] is reverberations and ruptures, and that's about a theoretical framework that we developed and how it has been taken up by scholars in different places and in different subject areas in ways that we didn't quite imagine when we put it out there into the world. And we're pretty much very happy with how it has been taken up. We're pretty surprised in some respects. And so that's why we were asked to do a second book on it by Teachers College Press.

David: The second thing that I'm working on is sort of personal in that it came out of the work that I did on my auto ethnography last year. And so I'm putting together, with Beth Ferri, a edited book called How Teaching Shapes our Thinking about Disability, Stories from the Field. And what I'm asking people to do there is go back into their first few years when they were actually classroom teachers. And so if somebody is a lifelong educator and they ended up a scholar, a writer, and a college professor, I want them to go back to their earlier years and think about ways in which the actual experiences they had with kids informed them very much about what they thought about disability and actually became the basis of what propelled their research agenda. So I'm trying to sort of... Well, Beth and I are trying to show ways in which the arc of a career is shaped by actually working with kids with disabilities or adults.

Katie: That's fascinating. I love that idea.

David: Yeah. And the third one I'm working on at the moment is a big study. It's more traditional, although I do put disability studies into it when I can. And I'm [inaudible 00:04:40] and I work with about 120 people in three school sites, looking at ways in which schools help or hinder kids to transition from high school into the post high school world, whether it be applying for college or joining the job force. So that's a bit more traditional, that one.

Katie: So David, I know you've been doing this work for quite some time, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how your research questions are generated when you're thinking about this, both maybe with your current studies, but also with studies that you've done in the past? How do these things build on each other? How are you pulling this research together over this longer period of time that you've been working on it?

David: Okay. So if I may, I'll go back to the start. And I really started off my career in education as a special educator working in a segregated setting where all of the kids were pretty much a black and brown kids and the teaching staff was predominantly white. As somebody who was an immigrant, I also found it jarring that this passed for normal in this day and age, which was the mid 1980s give or take, and so that always stuck with me. But I also felt I was being, in my educational courses and also in the structures of the schools, inculcated into believing that there was something profoundly wrong with the kids that I was teaching. And so everything about them was described as a negative, it was a deficit, it was a disorder, it was disfunction. And I just thought there's something terribly wrong with this picture.

David: And so one of the ways that I was able to keep interest and stay in education was being a supporter of inclusive ed, trying to give kids access to what non-disabled kids have, both in school and out. And ultimately, that made me go on to do my doctoral degree. And it was there during my doctoral studies that I was introduced to disability studies by people like Beth Ferri and Kim Reed and it really changed how I thought because I always had deep misgivings about how disability was conceived and taught but I never had access to the words or the concepts that [inaudible 00:06:58] I was unaware of. But they were in disability studies all the time. So once I discovered disability studies, it really helped me reframe and also, in my teaching, helped me reframe how disabilities should be conceived of and taught. And so that often is the basis of many of the questions that I ask in research.

David: And I think my first big venture into doing that solo was my dissertation where I wanted to look at the experiences and the perspectives of adolescents who were, either Black or Latino, labeled learning disabled and came from working class or poor backgrounds because I thought these are the kids in the schools and they're not represented in any of the professional special educational literature, which was sort of race evasive, and most of the studies pretty much configured with middle class white kids. So it was always about disability and race sort of for me. And that's why many of my questions, my research interests have stayed in that ballpark, so to speak.

Katie: So I know you have done some combination of disability studies with critical race theory in one of your recent books, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about those frameworks and also other methodologies that have really helped you to dig into this work from the angles that you've just described.

David: Yeah. Well, I found that, and also did Beth and Subini, that we were interested in both critical race theory, which centers race as a way to predominantly and primarily understand how the world is configured, and we were also equally interested in disability studies, which had the same kind of disposition centered disability. And so we found that disability studies was not really engaging with issues of race and we found that critical race theory was not engaging with issues of disability for a variety of complicated reasons. And so we thought if we put them together we could foster conversation, some of them quite difficult because they touch upon a lot of our historical, structural contemporary issues. But we thought it would be necessary to develop this framework for longstanding issues, I don't like to call them problems, such as the... Or the representation of kids of color in special education categories such as their placement in more restrictive settings, such as the types of labels that they get.

David: I mean, disability labeling, special ed is very racialized. If we think of Asperger's, for example, an image of a white kid usually comes into mind, often middle class. If we talk about behavior disorders or emotional disturbance, statistics show that it's black males who get this label. And so it's tangled and it's complicated what we want to look at, but we think that particularly research in general, including in the field of special education, has not placed the attention it needs to or should do on these issues. And that's why 50 years later we still have very segregated schools based on race and disabilities to some extent too.

Katie: Okay. So I'm also really curious, David, you are a very prolific author, you have built, I think, one book off of another and shifted in multiple directions as you're thinking about this work, what are some tips and strategies that you can share about the growth of your writing and the connections you're making between these pieces over time and the prolific nature of that work? I think many people who are listening are very interested in how do you build a life around these kinds of works as a researcher?

David: Well, I think a genuine interest really helps. You're always looking to expand and build upon and make connections in an area that you personally find is intriguing and you're hoping that other people will too. And so I also think that there's a internal radar that you have to build in to look for opportunities to write. I'll give you one quick example based upon last night. Last night I was invited back to Hunter College, where I spent a big chunk of my career working, and they asked me to facilitate a group of about 80 people from across the community talking about the dreams and hopes of kids with disabilities. So I had a very disability studies based lens. And it was in three rounds of conversations that they had... And the conversations were rich and they weren't always easy, and so I went away and I had dinner with my colleagues last night.

David: And then this morning I'm thinking about how can I write that, "Oh, what happened?" How can I sort of convey what it's like to try to explore these issues and be respectful of everybody in the room and so on and so forth? And so there were Post-It notes and there were things on the wall and people wrote down their suggestions. So I'm thinking, with all due respect to... Not wishing to offend an IRB, how can I write a narrative about that? That was a natural, not normal occurrence because the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies has a special issue at the moment about disability studies in education, and I just thought I could do something with what happened last night to link it to the larger issues that are going on. Because for example, I spoke to a guy who had three degrees in education and he never had one course in anything to do with disability. So I think learning from that... And so that's one example, just looking for being open to opportunities.

David: And the other thing is you build upon a body of knowledge that hopefully you're helping to grow with your work, and there's always something different. There's always something extra. It can be with an idea from another person, it can be from somebody who you want to work with, it can be from somebody suggesting it to you. But I have to tell you, I have difficulty in saying no to people, which I shouldn't say in public because it's going to get worse, but if somebody comes with a writing project or a chapter idea or wants to write, then I think, how can this happen so it can be of benefit to somebody to read it? And I really go into it thinking, how can we put good stuff into the world that will be meaningful, provocative, and help people think through things to improve upon the systems and the structures and the things that we do?

David: So basically, that's my general answer. If it's specific one-on-one writing tips, which you said you might ask me about, I'd be happy to talk about that too.

Katie: Okay. Well, we may get into that a little bit later, but this is an excellent scratching of the surface of your work, David. We're going to take a brief break. When we come back, we'll hear a little bit more about one of David's recent books. Back in a moment.

Katie: The Research and Action podcast is brought to you by Oregon State University, Ecampus a top ranked online education provider meeting the needs of military service members.

Katie: Take the Diaz family for example. While Albert Diaz's military service required his family to move across the country, his wife Samantha earned her Oregon State psychology degree online despite the distance and multiple moves. And soon after, Albert followed in her footsteps, earning his post baccalaureate degree online in computer science. Read more about how Oregon State Ecampus fit the Diaz's military lifestyle and helped them achieve their dreams at ecampus.oregonstate.edu\albert.

Katie: David, I was so interested to hear about one of your recent works, Contemplating Disability, and I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about this book and what you chose to focus on in this particular project.

David: Oh sure. I'd be happy to. So I was on sabbatical at the time and I wanted to be very practical, and instead of going into schools and spending months getting permissions, especially in a different country, I thought I would do something that I could sit at my desk or on my couch and do. And so I think when you write or do ethnography, your memories are your data. And so that's not to say things are not rigorous or thoughtful or planned out or research based, but it does have a plus side to it. And I thought it would be interesting just to try to make sense of my own story. I was an accidental teacher, I had no aspirations, I thought I'd give it a try, and I actually feel I've had a wonderful life working in education. I'm not sure that there are many stories or accounts of the career arc of people who are in education and how they tried to make sense of it all from unexpected and challenging classroom experiences to then trying to assert one's ideas in academia through conferences, journals and books.

David: And part of me wanted to show the value of disability studies and how it provides a valid alternative to special education when talking about disability and education. So that was one of the reasons why I did it.

Katie: So one of the things that really fascinated me about this project is that you're using a combination of auto ethnography and memoir, which is not always typical in academic spaces. Now, we do have a previous episode on auto ethnography that I can link into the show notes for people who want to listen on that, but I'm just really curious about your choice to go in this direction. You mentioned wanting to be on your couch and doing this work, but this also is a diversion from some of the other methods that you had used in the past, can you talk a little bit about the choice to go in this direction and maybe some of the benefits and challenges that you encountered by using a combination of auto ethnography and memoir?

David: Okay. So I think that people make sense of the world through stories. So I had done work in narrative methodologies, getting people's stories out of them, what I would call staging it in different ways, but I do think stories help us understand the complexities of life. And if you think most of the religious texts are in the form of stories, and that is what people live their lives by, I'm not necessarily religious but I just find that an interesting observation. I think people like to read biographies and autobiographies as a genre. And most recently, there has been a total explosion in memoirs on the market of people follow publishing, so I thought it would be interesting to try to combine both auto ethnographic memoir and... Sorry, both auto ethnography and memoir because I think academia in general is a little bit stuffy and a little bit in-accessible to a lot of people and yet there's so much good stuff in it and so many good ideas that I think academics should strive towards doing more accessible texts.

David: And so to the best of my knowledge, this hadn't been done before and so I figured out if I did a memoir part, I could do whatever I want and then provide these nice rich descriptions, personal experiences that were meaningful to me, what I thought, how I felt, what I learned, so on and so forth. But then the second part of each chapter was when I took a couple of steps back and analyzed my own story with the particular lens of locating myself within the larger context of history and culture of a certain time and place, and how the systems and structures operated within that time of place. In other words, I wanted to look at what could be learned about education and society through the life of a professional. That was pretty much my main idea.

Katie: So I'm curious, who are the primary audiences for you of this book? You mentioned trying to break some of the more stodgy aspects of academic writing, what are you hoping readers will take away and who are you hoping will pick up this book?

David: Well, at the risk of speaking in heresy, I don't want to even promote the book until it comes up in paperback because the hardback cover by academic publishers is outrageously high so I'm kind of ashamed of that. But when it does come out in paperback [inaudible 00:20:03], I think it would appeal and be potentially valuable to educators who are either teachers because they see themselves reflected in it and also, professors because they see themselves reflected likewise, hopefully disability studies scholars and critical special educators, and I would say doc students and other researchers who are studying the method of auto ethnography to see a specific way that it can be modeled and done.

Katie: So I'm always really curious to hear about strategies of getting into this kind of methodology, and you had mentioned using memories as data, I'm wondering if there are other data sources that you pulled from and how you made choices about what would go in this book, what would not go in this book. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you approached using these methodologies?

David: Yes. So first of all, I thought it would be easier for the book to be linear, so I think it's then maybe seven or eight chapters in which each one is a distinct standalone link in a job or a particular function that I had in terms of education. I also then made big lists of what do I remember the most? Who are the people and what were the incidents that stuck out? What did I learn from the most? What were some of the key incidents or critical incidents that I thought would make a good read, but also served to show what I was trying to show? Things like systems, structures, attitudes, learnings, breakthroughs that hopefully would stitch together the deepening knowledge about how we come to education and make sense of it.

David: And so as with many things, when you do qualitative research, I always feel it's like a documentary film. I had the pleasure of working with Susan and Ellen Raymond once, and they told me that for every 200 hours they film, 199 end up on the cutting room floor. So it's that going back and forward and distilling things until you craft what you think is a good rendition of what you want to then share. And I thought that part was a challenge, but a particularly pleasant one. And it was another challenge to step back and then have a framework by which you will look for the things I've talked about, the structures, the attitudes, the systems that influence how people think about disability ability and so on.

Katie: So we teased a little bit maybe some potential writing tips and strategies that you might have to share for folks, is there anything that's top of mind for you that's been really effective for you in your writing?

David: So apart from what I've mentioned, like you really have to have a genuine interest in it because it's going to stay in your head for a long time, the other things are very practical because I work with my doc students on this all the time. You need to block your time, at least half a day, preferably one or two. You stock the fridge, you don't answer your phone, you don't text anybody. You have to make sure what you're doing is the only primary thing you're thinking about. So those are some of the practical tips.

David: I also think, without being too firm, that it's good to have the end in sight, meaning you kind of know what you want to come up with. So the more that you plot out and do a development sequence trajectory of what you're working towards, it helps you populate it piece by piece instead of being very intimidated by the whole 30 pages or whatever if you're doing an article. I also think you have to push yourself but not go too fast, because if you go too fast, you're writing in haste. And so it's better just to sit, sit and push yourself at the same time. And when you've done your first draft, I would say you need to leave it for a day and then go back to it at least five to seven times every single day afterwards because each day you will see errors, slippages, ways you could have said things better. And so I see this as a process of polishing, polishing, polishing.

David: And of course, if you have a trusted friend, you should be able to share what you're doing with them. If you belong to a community of writers, that's better because you can take your work in a group.

David: Another quirky little thing is to try to make sure that your title is interesting, that would stop somebody in their tracks or it would pique their interest because many people will look at titles on the internet or doing a search, an academic search, and you really want to be very clear, but hopefully have some little hook in the title itself.

David: And the other thing that I tell my doc students is have the journal in mind that you want to write for and study that journal. Download at least three of the articles, look at the format, look at the tone, and write into that format and tone. And also cite the the journal at least three times because journals are vain too, they want to make sure that they're being acknowledged in the world. And all of these are little tidbits, and I... Maybe I shouldn't say this way, but it's just learning to play the game. That's all it really is. And I want to demystify academia as some holier than thou place. It's just sort of a game in a marketplace like anywhere else, and we're competing to get our ideas through as best as we can.

Katie: These are great tips and strategies. All right, we're going to take another brief break. When we come back we'll hear a little bit more from David about his thoughts on special ed as a field. Back in a moment.

Katie: We're proud of Research and Action. And I hope you find the episodes interesting, valuable and actionable. If you're enjoying the show, help others discover Research and Action by rating and reviewing it on iTunes.

Katie: David, I know you have worked in special education, you've also clearly been doing work in thinking in disability studies, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the relationship between those two things as you have encountered them in your work.

David: Yeah. Well, that is a big question, and I guess it might be easy to start off by saying and referring to things I said earlier. I met a small group of people who were not really happy with what I would call the limited perspectives or the limited scripts that were offered in special education in terms of how it conceived of disabilities, how it taught disabilities, the type of research that it supported. And these scholars found, I guess more fulfilling answers in the field of disability studies, so I have to say I was very fortunate in terms of the timing because I was with a group of people from across the country who became interested in forging a sub-discipline of disability studies called disability studies in education.

David: And what this did for us was it allowed us to have a much more expansive look at what is disability, how should we teach about it, how should we advocate that it isn't teacher education programs and how should it be taught in the curriculum, K through 12 and university settings, and so on and so forth. And so through that, disability studies in education grew as a sub field.

David: And the irony is the majority of us are working in special education still because we care about educating teachers to work with kids who've been identified as having disabilities. And so we work within the structures that are special ed, but ideologically, we are much more aligned with disabilities studies in education. And this is a conversation that reverberates all the way through to current times.

David: Let me give you an example. The issue of the representation of kids of color in special education has been around for 50 years, but there were some scholars in special education who refuted that with what I would call some dubious and flawed research, but the field of special ed took that up and ran with it and invited the people to duplicate and write in their other journals. Meanwhile, for those of us who wanted to have a response or argue otherwise, the special ed journals blocked us. And so we then have to go to other journals to publish our findings, our perspectives and so on and so forth. So for me, it's an example of the field of special education being race evasive, because these issues go on. We still see them in schools, we still see them in statistics collected by various centers dedicated to studying this. So this is problematic for some of us.

David: And so this year we wrote some articles that were not in special ed journals. A couple of them, for example, I wrote with Wendy Cavendish, Taucia Gonzalez and Patrick John Pierre, Troubling “The Problem” of racial overrepresentation in special education: a commentary and call to rethink research. How we do our research is inadvertently contributing to the problem because we're not asking the right questions, looking in the right places, making the right suggestions. And it's a shame really because it means that because special ed is so limited and so insular, it doesn't even want to engage about some of the issues we care about deeply, which made us write an article called, Is a Bridge even Possible over Troubled Waters. The field of special education negates the overrepresentation of minority students, and this is why we had to create our own field of disability studies in education to keep these important issues in the foreground becomes the one really being addressed in our field.

Katie: So this sounds quite contentious as you have these two different sides talking back and forth to each other or at each other, maybe not with each other yet, what is a way forward? For other people who are listening to this and maybe identifying with this, maybe they're saying, "I'm in a similar situation in my field where I'm having to speak back against things that I think are maybe not representative of what's really happening," what are some directions that you think are helpful as you're starting to do this work? You've mentioned publishing in other journals so that you can get the work out there, are there other strategies that have been helpful to you?

David: So I think especially for the academics who are listening to this and find themselves in a traditional position, but wanting to do their research in more progressive ways, it is a dilemma. And so I often speak with middle-level professionals in their career and say, in some ways you have to play it safe and do what you love. So you have to try to publish in both traditional and progressive and be able to justify why you're doing so. And I think that's possible so that the entire bridge is not totally broken down. When people are more advanced in their careers, some of them just press eject from the field of special ed because it's always been like that and they don't really expect it to change that much and it can feel a bit exasperated having their well-written articles rejected and then have them accept it in a much higher level international journal for example. So they get a bit frustrated with the way the field is.

David: It's like a [inaudible 00:32:19] uncle in the corner of a Christmas party, nothing's going to change it, what did we do? Well, they're still here. They're going nowhere. So we have to try to at least keep some channels open, but... I guess that's what I would say.

Katie: Those are helpful strategies. David, I'm curious, what's next for you in terms of current projects? What are you working on next?

David: So, as I mentioned at the beginning, we're doing two edited books simultaneously. So we're just starting to get some of those contributions in and trying to decide which ones we will be able to use. And I would say my more traditional research at the moment with Wendy Cavendish, we're enjoying writing an article about self-determination of kids at the high school level, how do they pick and choose what's an offer and how can we [inaudible 00:33:16] schools to provide means that will help kids be more successful as they leave school? Because it's always been an iffy area, and I honestly think we've gone two steps forward and three steps back in many ways, and so it's just an area that we're concerned about. So I think juggling those three things will be enough for now.

Katie: Okay. Well, David, this has been really fascinating. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing about your work in disability studies.

David: I'm really happy that you invited me. And I hope the listeners will have found, what we talked about, useful.

Katie: Okay. And speaking of our listeners, thanks also to them for joining us for this week's episode of Research and Action.

Katie: The Research and Action podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education that delivers transformative learning experiences to students around the world. Learn more by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu. This podcast is produced by the award-winning OSU Ecampus multimedia team.