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Reimagining Educational Research: A Conversation

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Dean Carter: Professor Nasir's research examines the racialized and cultural nature of learning and schooling, and the socio-cultural and political context of learning, especially in contexts with inequities and low educational outcomes. For those of you who don't know, Professor Nasir was selected as the next president of the Spencer Foundation, the nation's foremost philanthropic organization whose express purpose is to support and underwrite educational research. Here stands a history maker. I believe that you are the first woman of color to lead the foundation, and likely, one of the first women of color to lead a major foundation committed to academic research. I am deeply honored to be in your presence.

Professor Nasir and I are going to have a conversation here today. To start us off, we will try to set the tone this morning by asking some big questions of each other, of you, around where we are today in terms of educational research in the 21st century. In terms of thinking about the state of educational research, we ask: What should we be thinking about in this moment? What's pressing in terms of directions? And whatever else you want to talk about, so here we go. I will start off by asking you, Professor Nasir, what's on your mind about where you believe educational research might need to be headed in the next decade or so.

Professor Nasir: Thank you, good morning. I am also deeply honored and humbled to have this conversation with you. So, what's on my mind? There is a lot on my mind. There has been a lot on my mind when I think about this next career phase for me, and what it means to lead the Spencer Foundation. I have been thinking about the state of our field and where we should be headed. I feel like I have spent the last year and a half thinking deeply about this place and this campus, how we think about equity, and how we have built equitable structures here at a variety of levels. And so, I want to preface my comments by saying: This is, for me, an unprecedented historical moment in our country, and so it's been the context for almost everything I have been thinking about since the November election of President Trump. How did we get to this place where there is a national platform for bigotry that has not been around since the 50s, at least? I think about our role as a field in relation to that and wonder where we dropped the ball. Where did we as a country drop the ball?

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So, when I think about research, I think about a couple of things. The first is the impact of our work. We have, I think as a field, had a bit of an inferiority complex, much like psychology a generation before, which is we have wanted to prove that our research is rigorous enough—is good enough—and in doing so, we have separated ourselves from practice. You see this when you look at the top 10 education schools, including Berkeley. We have to re-engage in thinking about the big problems of our field, and we need to work to help solve some of those big problems of our field. The question of impact and educational research is both about the kind of work we are producing, and how we share our work with the world. So, in terms of the kind of work we produce, we should consider the big questions of our field rather than doing rigorous and intellectually stimulating things and then figuring out how they connect after the fact. Of course, there is always a role for basic research. I don't want to say that all of our work needs to be directly applied, but I think we need to think collaboratively and collectively as a field about how we are working on the major educational problems. The collective piece is important.

With respect to how our work is taken up, or how we share our work, sometimes we don't think enough about the consumers of our work. It is critical to think about how our work translates to educational policies, educational practice, and how we support our colleagues out in the schools, those who are running school districts, teaching, and creating educational environments for our children. How are we helping them do their work better with our research? I am thinking about what in doctoral research training might need to shift or be augmented to make our work more translatable, or what other layer of translation work does our field need? Our scholarship really has to be about how we are impacting the world. The big questions for the field are about access, about equity, about who has access to high-quality education and instruction in this country, and about what a high-quality education looks like. The big questions of our field are questions that can't be addressed in our silos. They have to be addressed by us working together across disciplinary boundaries.

Dean Carter: I have been thinking a lot about this question, and I wonder if there is a way that we can diminish these boundaries. There is also the big question: Can we fundamentally and radically reduce educational inequality in our society if the macroeconomic and political contexts remain stagnant in terms of economic inequality? Or is it just enough for us, as educational researchers, to work on assessing how school-based factors influence the educational well-being of those who historically have been left behind? In addition, there is a question of absolute versus relative inequality. Absolute inequality is reduced by improving the outcomes of those historically disadvantaged, but relative inequality remains if the groups who are at the top continue to thrive at the same time. Many groups have pulled away at the top from those in the middle and the bottom. We can bring all those groups up, we can improve teaching and learning so that the inputs are good, and we can improve things in education, but does that fundamentally get rid of educational inequality? The answer is no, it does not fundamentally reduce relative inequality. There is a parallel question in the developing world in some ways: When a country has limited academic resources but is trying to improve mass public education and improve literacy, it is trying to improve the overall well-being of its population. Is it actually reducing inequality between the social classes,

however? If we want to solve a bigger problem of inequality, we have to think about what the field of education needs to do in conjunction with those who work in economics, politics, health, and other areas. It is a quandary, I believe. Many of us believe that through our research we are focusing on the reduction of inequality when we explain the reduction of test-score differences. However, we are not necessarily doing that if we take these universalistic approaches where all boats are rising. Relative inequality endures. We do not achieve either equality or equity, per se.

We use the term equity loosely, but do we fundamentally understand it? Do we know what equity means? Because equality is not equity, right? Equity requires us to invest in innovations, interventions, and solutions that will radically elevate less advantaged social classes, and try to diminish the gradients of inequality among social groups along the socioeconomic ladder. (I am talking like a sociologist now because that is what I am.) Further, where is the political will in American society, global society, to get there? Do we have the will to do that? Is it enough? What I have been thinking about, too, is who utilizes the work we produce as researchers? For the last three years, I have worked on a research utilization project: How federal policymakers actually use educational research to make their decisions. Regrettably, very little of our research is absorbed by those who make the decisions that significantly impact our children's educational well-being. How do we change that? Those are the people making the decisions who have their hands on the levers of what's going to become policy mandates. They don't necessarily have full control over what becomes practice—practices within the microcosms of classrooms and within schools—but they do make the mandates, and a lot of those policies are problematic. So how do we change that relationship? Have you thought about that?

Professor Nasir: Well indeed I have. I have so much I want to say. You talked about the political will and that, of course, is one of the key questions of this moment: Does our national policy reflect our political will? Especially if you think about the liberal perspective, right? I don't know if I would say yes to that right now. I think it reflects not having a coherent, cohesive agenda and working together to achieve it. I feel like there are two ways I imagine going from here with education: One is, can we think about a national vision that has equity at its core? And what does that national vision look like? What do we want to see? Aside from all the challenges and problems and misfires that we know our system of education operates with, if we were going to create schools, if we were going to create a system of education that serves all children, what would it look like? What if we started with that question? What do we know about that? And then I thought, well, we actually already know what those schools look like, and in a room like this we know because those are the ones we're looking for to send our kids to. We know exactly what we're looking for, right? Places where kids can develop a strong sense of themselves as whole people, where their self-esteem is intact, where they feel empowered, places where they are engaging in deep and critical learning, places where they are learning to think critically about our world, to be socially engaged, to be civically engaged, places where their full potential is allowed to thrive and develop. Right?

And then you think about who we are providing that for now as a society, and who we are not providing it for. And what would it look like to provide it for those who don't have it? I think a lot on this question in relationship to my own children, and what it

means as a Black parent to be looking for functional schools for my kids and feeling like I'm always choosing either the place that's going to be intellectually engaging and rigorous or the place that is not going kill their spirit as Black children. And the fact that I'm always choosing that means we're pretty far, and I'm well resourced as far as resources go in society. So if I can't even find it, how can someone with fewer resources? So we're far from the vision of what we want to create and provide for all of our kids. Even the phrase *all children* is politically problematic because what that school looks like for my kids might be different than what it looks like for someone else's kids—what that empowerment looks like, what that cultural richness looks like, what the intellectual development looks like. And so, I think there's something important about holding a higher vision on the one hand and having a vision, not just as individuals but also as a field, that we can agree on. Then there is a whole other arm where we might be engaged, where we help to develop the political will. Political agendas don't unfold because people think it's a good idea. Political agendas unfold because people work together strategically to make them unfold. So there's this cultivation of political will that needs to happen, that I think is also really important, that we've ignored, right?

Dean Carter: I agree, and I think you are right. At the same time, we live in a country where many political differences exist, and if we live in a diverse society, we have to allow for the spectrum in diversity of ideas and ideology. I believe that one main societal challenge, and where education is implicated, is that we are not raising nor socializing a generation about how to live and share power and resources in a society of difference. When you think about where we are currently in the United States, how divided and color-coded, I keep wondering: Where are the points of intervention? How do we get people to look beyond their own self-interests, to look toward the interest of a stable and healthy democracy in the nation? How do you change the collective mindset so that people will allow coexistence with a variation of thought and being, without undermining the existence of those who do not look or think like them? And so this is a micro- and meso-level problem of inequality that is creating and reproducing a macro-level problem of inequality.

David Labaree is a historian down at Stanford who writes about education as a public good versus education as a private good. He has written a seminal article about the fact that in the last 50 years or so, many of us have subscribed to the idea of education as a private good. How do I insure that my children are as well educated as they can possibly be so that they can be competitive, so they can get into great colleges and universities, so they can get the best jobs? And what that has entailed is our collusion in processes of inequality in terms of where we live, who can and cannot attend our local schools, who are members in our friendship circles, which often produce or engender social capital. All of these decisions actually reproduce inequality. Every last one of us is implicated in it.

How do we check ourselves in the choices we're making? How do we also change the socialization process—the hidden curriculum in education—so that when we send our children to school, when we make personal choices, we can encourage them to be more aware of the processes that reproduce inequality in our society and of how our behaviors may hamper the ability of education to become a public good that enriches and enhances our democracy? And that's one of the biggest dilemmas. We can say that the structures and policies in place are so big that we cannot do anything about them, but consider our

everyday behaviors, what we do, what we engage in. I'm guilty of that. Most of us want to rely on schools where the test scores are the highest and where the teachers have the most experience, and then we use that logic to determine that those are the best schools. Yet, when you look at other indicators, and particularly for historically disadvantaged groups, there is frequently a miner's canary in such schools. Many are not such great schools when you look at indicators such as the ethos of inclusion for all groups, these groups' sense of belonging, collective efficacy, and ability to participate in every facet of the school. Then when you examine other schools that may not look as great on paper—based test score outcomes—they do very well in the socio-psychological and socio-cultural domains, which is why I am happy about California having multiple measures today. We have the [California School] dashboards, where school-quality index is multi-modal, and it is not just about test scores. I believe that is necessary because that can help us address why some kids are doing well in some well-resourced school contexts and others are not. Why do we have some of the persistent problems at Berkeley High, for example, or in other districts like Palo Alto? I've seen it there. Everywhere, the widest forms of educational inequality are in college towns across the nation: Berkeley, Evanston, Palo Alto, Ann Arbor, and these are good-willed, good-natured people living in these places. How do we penetrate that? Where does the research need to go? Where do the interventions need to go, the solutions, to tackle that problem?

Professor Nasir: I agree with everything you just said. The point about buying into education as a private good is a point well taken. I also think, though, that what we are missing is a narrative that frames things differently. We've been buying into this test score narrative, a narrative that measures the quality of schooling by test scores, the quality of teaching by the test scores of students. We've been in this cultural place of accepting these distal measures of the quality of education for too long. So, if I could mastermind everything, there would be a big narrative shift that brings back this notion of a public good. Because I actually think people believe that more than their behavior suggests. There are a couple of deep beliefs I hold about human nature: [First], that people are fundamentally good and socially oriented and want good for themselves and for others. I think that's a fundamental truth, at least I have to believe that. It's just that what that looks like for each of us is negotiable. Second, people are pack animals, so we move to the mean. And so, that's why I keep coming back to this national vision, or set of priorities or ethics around education, whatever that is. People need a way to make the connection between those fundamental beliefs and their own actions every day. Giving people something to believe in and work toward, at a higher level than themselves, is important and something we could engage in as a field.

The point about the college towns is so fascinating to me. Our colleague, sean reardon, has this amazing new dataset that looks at achievement in all the school districts across the country and is able to look at the places where the inequities are biggest, where achievement is highest, and where achievement outpaces what you might expect for a particular district. It's an example of how our work needs to take on these bigger questions. Of course, I think that work also needs a qualitative follow-up because the measure of school quality is still test scores in that dataset, beautifully normed and meaned and all of that. But qualitative data would allow us to think about what is happening in those places on a whole other level. But again, that's part of why research

should be a collective activity. So sean can say, we should look here, here, here, and here in the country to get at these types of questions. And then there could be teams of folks that say, okay, I'm going to go here and look at this question. And then there's collective building of knowledge.

Let me ask you a question: You've been here at Berkeley as the Dean for almost a year now. How are you thinking, in your position as the Dean, about the role of graduate education schools in all of what we've been talking about? What can education schools do?

Dean Carter: That's a great question, and I want to pick up on something you said earlier. First, when I came here, I said that under my tenure, my main mission was to figure out how to facilitate, broker, and lead us as a school to make the work that we need to do here matter more—matter to our local communities, to our district, to our nation, to our world. I am trying to do that by facilitating research-policy-practice linkages and deepening those linkages. That is my goal. The first year, you try to grow your legs and get them under you, to learn a new institutional culture and context, and it has really been about, first, how do we organize ourselves in a more efficient way, so that we can actually focus on those visions? What I have learned—and this was my being idealistic—is that the dean's role is significantly more managerial than programmatic, and I had not anticipated that. So my role is really as a shepherd, to encourage, to support faculty and students and staff to do that work. Someone told me once, and I don't know if they were being kind or not, that to be a dean you have to be a narcissist. And I thought that was really interesting because I feel like as a dean, I'm actually being masochistic. It has entailed suspending my own research career, and that has been a major sacrifice. So what makes me happy, heartens me, and keeps me wanting to come back every day is when I look out into the room, and I engage with students and faculty, and I hear about the things they are doing. Hopefully, I am able to fundraise, to program, to organize, and to facilitate things at an organizational level, so that the good work can still be done.

Schools of education cannot marginalize themselves from the rest of the campus. What we need is to be in deeper conversations with disciplines across campus. We need to show up at other kinds of talks and not just talks in our own school. Yesterday, I was at a big lecture given by your predecessor, former Spencer Foundation President Michael McPherson, and I looked around the room, and I actually was saddened because I saw very few people from the [Graduate School of Education] community there, but I saw tons of people from the social sciences and history, and this is one of the major higher-education thinkers in the country. Now I know people are busy—I had a 12-hour workday yesterday—but I do think it is important for us to take the time to broaden our scholarly horizons, our intellectual engagement across these boundaries. One of my objectives is to bring this school more toward the center of the campus because there's a lot going on at Berkeley. There is quite a bit that education scholars, researchers, and practitioners can do to inform some of the initiatives that are being taken up around the campus, but in order for us to be effective, we have to be present. And the dean brokers that, but I can't do it alone. And so that's one of the things that I encourage students particularly to do. There are initiatives. There are all kinds of fascinating things going on for students. I know we are all busy, but I want to encourage us to be more invested in the campus. Schools of education could render themselves obsolete if we do not find a way

to work with the people who are making the major decisions. So my vision is to make us matter more. And it's not just structural. We have agency as an organization of individuals to be a part of the process. I am doing everything I can behind the scenes. I have no magic, but I am going to try to do the best that I can.

Author Biographies

Prudence L. Carter *is Dean and Professor of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California Berkeley. Dr. Carter's research agenda focuses on causes of and solutions to enduring social and cultural inequalities among social groups, especially in education and schooling. Specifically, she examines academic and mobility differences influenced by the dynamics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the U.S. and global society. Her expertise spans issues of youth identity and educational well-being; urban poverty; social and cultural inequality; and the sociocultural and organizational contexts of schools. Dr. Carter is the author of the award-winning* Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White *(2005), and* Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. and South African Schools *(2012), and co-editor of* Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance *(2013), all published by Oxford University Press, along with numerous articles and book chapters. She is an elected member of the National Academy of Education and the Sociological Research Association, and a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association. She also serves on the Board of Trustees for the William T. Grant Foundation where she chairs the Program Committee.*

Na'ilah Suad Nasir *is the sixth President of the Spencer Foundation, which supports research about education. She was a faculty member at the University of California Berkeley in 2008–2017, where she served as Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion from November 2015 forward. Nasir earner her PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of California Los Angeles in 2000, and was a member of the faculty in the School of Education at Stanford University in 2000–2008. Her work focuses on issues of race, culture, learning, and identity. She is the author of* Racialized Identities: Race and Achievement for African-American Youth*, and has published numerous scholarly articles. Nasir is a member of the National Academy of Education and a fellow of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). In 2016, she was the recipient of the AERA Division G Mentoring Award.*