Holding Space Season 1, Episode 2 Transcript
"Understanding Educational Equity" with Dr. Melissa Wooten

Dr. Joan Collier: Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us for another episode of Holding Space. I'm your host, Dr. Joan Collier, Senior Director of Institutional Equity and Strategic Initiatives for University Equity and Inclusion at Rutgers University. On this podcast, we make room for conversation and learning that covers all sorts of topics related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Each episode, I'll speak with a guest or guests about the specific work they do to advance equity within the Rutgers Community. For this episode, we'll play a conversation I had with Dr. Melissa Wooten. She's the former Associate Vice President for Academic Equity at Rutgers University. As a note, we recorded this conversation a few months ago while she was still in that role. So, you'll hear us refer to her in that capacity throughout the episode. We had an extremely insightful conversation about her journey, educational equity, and the responsibility of the university. Let's check it out.

Dr. Joan: Dr. Wooten, so glad to have you today.

Dr. Melissa Wooten: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Joan: So, we've worked together since 2020 and I know you. We have each other cell phone numbers. We even text after meetings. But for people who don't know you, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you arrived at the work that you do.

Dr. Melissa: Sure. So, I guess, I would start by saying that I am from Detroit, Michigan and that is actually not only important in terms of family, but is also important in terms of how I came to this work. My parents, actually, were key members and founders of a Black labor organization. And so, they founded an organization that was called the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Dr. Joan: Melissa, this is so on brand. I understand. Okay.

Dr. Melissa: And what that organization was working towards was to push the United Auto Workers to actually represent its Black employees. And so, my parents organized wildcat strikes. Those are strikes that are not approved by the Union. And the organization also had community outreach arms. And so, my mother helped publish a newspaper that was a part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

They organized students and they did a lot. And then, they had kids and like, most revolutionaries decided that they couldn't raise kids and be revolutionary. Those stories were definitely part of my childhood and they maintain contact with people and were both involved in

their respective unions. My mother went on to become a teacher, my father remained an auto worker. And so, for me, I was interested in just like how Black people do that. Like all the ways in which Black people are trying to get free, I was interested in. And so, that became something of a lifelong interest and there was a point in time when I was considering grad school. I had thought about going to get an MBA and then learned that you could actually get a PhD in Organizational Behavior. And since I was interested in how Black people use organizations to get free, I thought maybe I could go ahead and study this and make a career out of it.

I'm presenting it as more of a straight line than it actually was, but that's the short and neat version of it. I was also interested intellectually, and because I had experienced it personally, in terms of having worked before I went to grad school. So I knew from my family that you could use organizations to get free but I also knew that organizations were quite oppressive spaces based on my experience of working in them.

And so, I wanted to know both those ends of that continuum and organizational behavior tends to be situated in business schools. And so, I went off to the University of Michigan Business School, it's now called the Ross School of Business, in order to study Management and Organizations. And then, again, still interested in the work that my parents did, not wanting to necessarily study my parents or their work. And so, how do I study something that's kind of similar to that? And so, I got fascinated by the idea that after Brown v. Board, after the Civil Rights Act, the only category of organizations that still claimed Blackness in any way that survived enmass were historically Black colleges and universities. And so, if you think about Black newspapers, there are a handful left. Not what it was.

Dr. Joan: Not what it was. Black radio stations.

Dr. Melissa: …or hotels, like now we have this renaissance around like the Black boutique, bed and breakfast. That was all we have. And so, wanting to use the counterfactual of the historically Black colleges to understand how do single race institutions carve out spaces when the legal underpinnings shift dramatically, is what I was interested in studying.

And so, that's what I studied and then I got a job in the Sociology department. Again, not as quick, not as an easy road as I'm making it seem like, but that was my trajectory after grad school. So, historically Black colleges I'm interested in that. I'm also interested in them because they remain key spaces in Black education. They represent 3% of all colleges and universities, but graduate 20-25% of all Black students with an undergraduate degree. And so, wanting to understand how they continue to produce Black excellence and how they support students in that area. And then also wanting to understand what are some ways in which traditionally or historically white institutions have come to take on equity work and are they successful? Do they use similar frameworks as Black colleges? And so I actually went back to an institution that I was familiar with in Michigan to do a study about a pre-college program that was responsible for 95% of Black enrollment at their college.

Dr. Joan: 95%?

Dr. Melissa: 95%. Yes.

Dr. Joan: I feel like this is a whole... I like all of this. I'm also noting in my head, like this is a whole another episode all on its own that I'm making notes of, Dr. Wooten. And so, look for the other invite.

Dr. Melissa: I will. So yeah, a lot of my research was around trying to just understand education at an organizational level, at an institutional level and how it gets organized to support Black Americans. And so, that's like the pull factor. The push factor that I think many Black faculty can relate to, even if you don't want to do this work administratively. It is hoist upon you oftentimes. And so, I definitely also had that element where yes, that was my intellectual interest, but I was not wanting to take on the work of making my department a safer space. Not because I didn't want it to be safer, but I was trying to get promoted. And didn't really feel like that was my work to do, like I hadn't made it unsafe and so I was being called on to make it safe for people like me. But after I got promoted I was more willing to do that type of work and was also then experiencing more of a pull factor.

So, you know, the push was people wanted me to do that work before I got promoted, but then after I got promoted, I did start to feel more interested in that work. There were some ways in which that was actually what I wanted to do more than have research be the biggest part of my life. And so, I still research, still looking at Black education. I have a project that's going much more slowly because now I'm full-time administration, but still writing... that's looking at early 20th-century philanthropy for Black educational spaces and essentially trying to understand how the institutional space for that type of philanthropy gets constructed. And so, I feel like there is already a lot of research on why these rich white men like John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie who were interested in doing it. And they talked about the colonialist attitudes, wanting to support these spaces to help solve what they talk about is being like the Negro problem, but I feel like there's less of an understanding of lots of people want to do things. Lots of people with money want to do things, but that doesn't mean they actually get to do them.

And so, can we understand how spaces get organized so that people can do things? And so that's what I'm trying to understand now.

Dr. Joan: Melissa, that is a whole- I have notes all over my page. I do. I think what you say about how the space gets organized, how you actually get people into the work. And so, for folks who are not in DEI or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion spaces, or access spaces, or outside of an educational framework, they may not have heard the term 'educational equity'. When I hear you saying like, I saw all these different things, you've done it at the organizational level. You've looked across institution types, you look in institutions, and for folks who are not familiar with

that term, what does it mean? And how does it inform your work? How does this make sense to someone who's like, "educational what? Isn't education equity in and of itself? How does that work for folks?

Dr. Melissa: One of the reasons that I actually had to get good at explaining what educational equity is ,I used to teach a class called the Sociology of Education so I have to give really good and find graphics to help students understand the differences between equality and equity. One of my favorite graphics is a cartoon and there's a fence that's you know, like a certain height, like 7 feet high. Equality is all the students, regardless of their height, get the same box. And so, the tallest student can see over the fence but the one who was shortest, they're taller, but they still can't see over the fence. And so, that's like equality. We've given everyone the same and good luck with that. Like your goal is see over the fence. You all got a box, figure that out. Versus educational equity, if we have the same fence, one dude is tall enough, he doesn't actually need a box, he can just see over the fence. The other two who are on the shorter side, give them appropriately-sized boxes so that they can see over the fence. That is equity. So actually giving students what they need to succeed in that very simple cartoonist explanation. It is their goal, success for them looks like seeing over the fence so that they can watch the baseball game. And so, what does that say in principle look like when the stakes are a little bit higher and so, when it's not just you're trying to see over a fence so that you can enjoy a baseball game, but you're trying to access an institution of higher education. Once you're here, you're actually trying to get out in 4 years so that you don't rack up a bunch of student debt. You're also hoping to land a good job or explore graduate school opportunities. And so, if we take for granted that students come in with different sets of needs. What does it actually look like to be prepared to support them appropriately? We can't give them all the same things because that's not equity. That will not actually recognize that students come in with different resource constraints. They come in with different opportunities or having had different opportunities coming into the institution. And so, what does it look like to approach that from an equity based perspective and to also let go of our ideas that are somehow problematic that students are coming in at different starting points. We can actually exist in the context where that's okay. And so, what does that look like to then meet students where they are and from an equitable perspective. And so, whenever I'm talking about equity, I also like to remind people that despite the fact that the legal landscape may have changed, it is important to remember that our concepts around equality and equity stem from different Supreme Court decisions in particular, Brown v. the Board of Education.

And that there were moments in American society when we actually did focus squarely around issues of equity. And that is when we made the greatest achievements, in terms of lowering things like the Black-white education gap or achievement gap. And so, if you believe that those gaps are real the matter and you want to do something about them, the only framework that has ever showed itself useful or proved its weight in salt, is actually an equity-based framework. And so, if we look at the period between like the 70's to probably the mid 80's, when there was a sense of you cannot equalize outcomes without giving real attention to resources within schools, giving real attention to... it's not just enough to populate Black and white bodies in spaces and

expect that magic will happen. But you actually have to do something to make sure that there is no racialized spaces in these organizations. So, it can't just be like all the janitors in the school are Black and all the teachers are white, but you actually have to do something to equalize opportunities among staff within school as well as students within schools. That you actually have to purposefully work to integrate after school components. So, you have to pay attention to who's playing what sports and actually figure out what to do, how to engineer diversity within those spaces, how to engineer integration within those spaces. Those moments when we, as a society, made the greatest efforts and saw the greatest benefits for those efforts. And as we moved away from it, particularly in the early 2000s with the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act, where the focus became on achieving equal outcomes without the focus on resources. That's how we get here, where it's actually difficult to talk about educational equity as being tethered to like race-conscious policies. But notwithstanding, again, the fact that the legal landscape has shifted is important. I think, whenever I talk about the issue to remind people that the frameworks we have for equity come from moments in history when we actually made the greatest progress. And so, we will continue to face challenges when we are only concerned about equality of outcomes, but we are not giving real attention as a society to what it takes to make resource distribution equitable.

Dr. Joan: Agreed, agreed, agreed. And this is why you are in this role. I'm a history nerd of sorts. I just enjoy history. And so, the context of the work matters... This should just this should look this way. Like no, actually, kind of here's been the historical landscape, here is where we are now. If we're trying to say that we actually believe that folks can come in at various places and spaces, at different resource levels and we can still get folks to the endgame which is to this degree with as little debt as possible and they be brilliant scholars and we believe that, then we want to be thoughtful about the resourcing that we have in place. So I'm going to combine 2 prompts of sorts and you're really brilliant. So I know you're going to pick it right up.

Language is real, right? Language has its own thing and it means things and all that kind of stuff. And especially, so when we talk about students and their abilities to be successful in college, so can you explain the difference between an equity mindset and a deficit mindset? And why it's important to shift our thinking in this regard and in the process of that, embedding it in what the responsibilities of an institution are to meet the needs of students?

Dr. Melissa: Sure. I will start with the first half of that and by the time I get talking, I might need you to remind me of the second.

Dr. Joan: I got you. I got you.

Dr. Melissa: I'm actually going to ground the conversation around why it's important to have equity rather than deficit-based mindset in context of, as we all are preparing to welcome millions of college students back to campuses. Many of us, for the first time since March 2020.

Particularly, within a leach or flagship context, whatever you want to call them, where there were efforts made to create alternative admission pathways that recognized the lack of availability to take an SAT or ACT exam. And so, in some sense, holistic review actually became holistic. More holistic than, even though they haven't calling it that...

Dr. Joan: It actually came what it's supposed to be.

Dr. Melissa: What it's supposed to be. And so, now we have welcomed classes that are more diverse. We have actually given due weight to things like GPA and courses taken, the types of things that we know matter more in particular for Black students than ACT or SAT ever did in terms of predicting persistence within college. And so, we've done this, we've done good work. We've produced more diverse classes along race and the socio-economic perspective in these past 2 years than some of us ever have or at least some of us have, again, since that legal landscape, say, coming out of like the Fisher case, maybe 2003-2005 or something. And so, now what you have are the rumblings of what are we going to do with all these students? Are they gonna be okay? Are they going to pass freshman math and composition because we don't know what their ACT and SAT scores are? We don't know anything about these students. They're going to need so much help. That's a deficit mind frame.

Here's an equity-based mind frame. We don't know about their ACT and SAT. But again, for particular categories of students, those are poor measures anyway, the research backs it up. But what we do know about these students, these students persisted through a pandemic, through something that has brought many of us to our knees at various moments. They managed to graduate high school, put together multiple applications, and get accepted to your school. And so, can we honor their persistence? Their rigor? Can we honor just the sheer weight of what those students have been through and they still kept their eye on the ball that we have put before them. We have told them, that college is important. It's a necessary credential and they managed to continue on that path at a moment that none of us had any experience for. And if anyone had less capacity to persist through it, it is people who are under 18, but they managed to do it. And so, what would it look like to actually say, "You got some strong students coming to campus." You have to show a level of mental and physical fortitude that I never have to show. We have some students who refused to give up. There were moments when I gave up over the last year and a half. And so, what would it look like to honor those students and to recognize the persistence and brilliance and excellence that they bring to this campus. Oh, we don't have that resource set up. We need to make sure that resources not only set up. But, again, set up in a way that matches the stick-to-itiveness that these students have brought to us. And so, if our students, again, who has faced what they have faced over the last year and a half, fail at our institution, we need to seriously question these systems that are set up at this institution because they did not fail in the pursuit of finishing high school under circumstances that half of us would have crumbled under within a month.

And so, if we can't figure out how to resource this institution properly to meet these students, it is

not them who is failed, it is us who has failed. That's what an equity, not deficit mindset looks like. The students are fine. If they fail, you're the problem.

Dr. Joan: That's right. What y'all can't see is me clapping my imaginary tambourine. It's really a postcard for some plants I bought earlier but yes, the critique is not of the individual, it's of the system or the structure that's in place.

I love the way you talk about educational equity and what it means to think about assets versus this deficit piece. When I was in grad school, my first time thinking about finding language within an academic framework that talked about assets for students in college that was, as you know, very different from... you weren't ready. You were this, you didn't come in with that, and it was your social community culture rather talk about this cultural wealth in linguistics with people who spoke multiple languages or aspirational capital that they had. "My mom didn't go but my grandparents been praying for me. They've been working for me and I believe I can get it done." And how do we capitalize on those things that students bring with them as we are working on the institutional structures that allow the students to capitalize on and us to make good on the seeds that they brought with them and all the stuff that they brought with them. And so, COVID's been ridiculous. It's still present. Still ridiculous, but last year, we really didn't know what was going to happen. If we didn't understand, I think going into March just how exhausting this would be. And it's still exhausting. Like, people are still tired and these students knew they have been through stuff but sitting still to really think about all that has come to pass that they're here, like they're going to be here and we have returning students who have never been to this campus, who will be here for the first time. And so, in thinking about folks being welcomed, and re-welcome back to campus, I'm going to slide us to the next one, to our next prompt, about who's already doing the work in our institutional context? And so, what resources are available for students from historically underserved groups that they can access here in New Brunswick to addressed gaps in what they need versus what's being provided.

Dr. Melissa: I think one of the great things about New Brunswick and actually one of the reasons that I wanted to come work here is that there are a number of programs in existence and that's actually not the case in every institution of higher education. And so, I'll just highlight a few and I'll start with the Educational Opportunity Fund Program because it's interesting to see the work that they do and how some academic departments have utilized their efforts as models to expand and build upon what they do. The Educational Opportunity Fund Program is for low-income students from the state of New Jersey. They provide academic counseling, financial counseling, and different services to the students who are enrolled in their program. One of the things that EOF programs do is have a first-year seminar experience that I believe it's called, "Are you first?" And the goal of that is to do a lot of work around the hidden curriculum. Again, if we just accept as fact and give no value judgment to the idea that students have more or less exposure to what is expected in a college space, then again, the question for us as an institution if we approach that as not a value judgment, but just as a fact, then what do we need to do to provide? What information do we need to provide those who come in with less access to that?

We also need to work on changing some of those expectations, but until they're changed, we need to let people know what they are. And so, space like "Are you first" does that. EOF can only serve the number of students that it can and then it's up to academic units to extend that perspective. In schools like SEB's, a School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, they have created their own "Are you first" experience. And so, for students who identify as first-generation, you're not a part of EOF, then you can take part in this program, in this set of classes, to help you again, get acclimated to the college experience, provide you with an extra layer of support so that you can be successful.

Other programs around campus, if you think about a program, like Rutgers Future Scholars that exist on all Rutgers campuses, but it ends up looking quite the same and so, in New Brunswick, thinking about the work that Rutgers Future Scholars is doing in the pre-college space, so again, creating a class of future Rutgers students and then once they get here continuing to support them through experiences that are similar to "Are you first?" Also providing access to career counseling. Again, supporting students through their life course. We have similar programs like that that are part of our division, part of DICE. And so, if you think about a program like Upward Bound. Now with Upward Bound, the students are not always ending up a Rutgers, that's not a part of the framework of Upward Bound. But, they're doing similar work as Rutgers Future Scholars in that pre-college phase cultivating future college graduates and a number of them do end up at Rutgers. Then, especially for students who are part of the Upward Bound program, we hand them off to Student Support Services to make sure that they are supported while they're in college.

And so, within our division, that's the federally-funded program that provides a support structure. So, again, academic, financial, and social support for first generation, low-income, or students with disabilities in college. And then, we also have programs like LSAMP and McNair that are helping students, first-generation, and low-income students and other historically minoritized students within higher education, identify postgraduate opportunities. And so, again, thinking about the ways in which, the student experience is so intricately tied to who are the faculty teaching them and so McNair and LSAMP, in particular, playing a key role in creating a pipeline of future faculty who do come from low-income, first-generation, or racially minoritized backgrounds. And again, so that key cycle, thinking about supporting students through pre-college while they're in college and then helping students identify opportunities that can help them come back to be in the college space as faculty members, if that's what they want to do.

And so, that's just like a handful of programs, some of which are getting state funding, some of which, academic units have taken that model to support that work using the funding that comes from the institution of Rutgers Future Scholars, thinking about private funds, our TRiO programs, thinking about federal funds. And so, again, now what we need to do is, as a university, think about how do we create more opportunities? How do we create more support structures? And what are the sources of funding for that? What does it look like to be able to

support this work at a more robust level and what are those combinations of funding that allow for that to happen?

Again, for me that has both that intellectual thing, that's sort of my research thing, how do programs and institutions that are trying to create opportunities for people to be free, however people are defining that freedom? How do they get resourced? A mini version of that administratively is in this work at Rutgers. Like what does it look like to identify resources so that we can expand the capacity for students to be free and again, however, their defining that. So, if your freedom is about, you want to end up a faculty member with a PhD in a classroom. I want to figure out the pathways to make that happen and how to resource those pathways appropriately. If your version of freedom is, I just need to know about the hidden curriculum in my first year. I want to figure out how to make that happen in as large a scale as possible.

Dr. Joan: I just want to say, yes, all of that. And how much it brings me so much joy that you are talking about educational equity as like freedom work. But I think, for some people who might be listening, that connection has never, those dots have never been pulled together.

A couple things you said I continue to have more and more notes.[crosstalk]

Dr. Melissa: Can I jump in Dr. J on the freedom note? I had thought about education or just, again, even like the work that my parents were doing as freedom work for most of my life. But I recently... A sorror of mine has a podcast called "Disrupted" and her name is Khalilah Brown-Dean. She's a faculty member at Quinnipiac University. She had interviewed Melissa Harris-Perry. And so, as I said, I have always thought about whatever Black people are doing to make themselves better as freedom. But what she mentioned which really resonated with me a lot is she said, "People always ask me like, "What's next? What's next for Black people? How do we push back? How do we do this?"" And she says and the thing that she always comes back to is when our ancestors were freed, the first things they did was find their family. And start schools. And vote. And so, I just can't think of better things to do. And so for me, it's the same thing that yes, I very much associate education with freedom.

And I also want Black people to have as many choices as they can. I do this work not just for Black people, but that is how I came to the work, trying to understand the Black experience. And so, I want people who have traditionally not had choices, who've had choices removed from them, to have as many choices as possible. And so, however you are defining freedom within the context of higher education, and whatever this degree is going to help you get, I want to be in a position to support that.

And so, I think that is also the important work of equity—that you don't get to define the importance of this degree for other people, but you need to figure out a way to support them in that work.

Dr. Joan: I think one question that sits with me still though is what would you have to offer to folks who after having heard this are still like, "I hear that." And I want everyone to have access to education, AND we all just got to pull ourselves together and make it happen. How do you invite them into conversation around educational equity to at least give them something else to work with to be reflective about?

Dr. Melissa: I think the way that I would sort of structure an answer to that question would be to ask from "where does the person who asked this question or try to enter?". And so, if you're a faculty member, everybody is not going to take my path, like out of the faculty ranks and full-time administration. But from the faculty ranks, there are things you can do to make your classroom more inclusive. If you're sitting at Rutgers, check out the inclusive classroom sessions that CTAAR has. If you are in SAS, Genevieve de los Santos has various resources that run the gamut from, I think she calls it like "Tea with Genevieve", to more structured spaces where you can talk about inclusive classroom practices. If you are a faculty member and you have more bandwidth to think about, not just how you can make your own classroom more inclusive and equitable then think about partnering with an EOF program in your college to say, "Hey, does your RU First model extend outside of EOF students? What might it look like to start one here?" Maybe that's more so for the undergrad program director or something, as opposed to, regular faculty member who's just trying to teach their class and do their research. So again, thinking about from where did you ask this question about what to do with this information?

If you're a staff member, say you're working in student affairs and you organize programming, are there issues around equity of access? Who can take part in your programming? Again, depending on where you're located, if you're the staff member who maybe is just, again, organizing, that space, not in control of like the resources around the space that just organizing the program, getting students to it, then one way to enter the conversation is somewhat similar to the faculty member who can do an inclusive classroom check. Like, is your programming inclusive? Is it equitable? Are there ways in which language could be disorienting is not the right word, but like, off-putting for students of color or for first-generation students? If you're more in control of how those programs get resourced, then you can have questions around the cost of programming and thinking about what would it look like. Again, the conversation that intersects with my administrative and academic interest is—are there ways in which to partner with the foundation to figure out private sources of money so that resources can be equalized in some way as student programming is put off and so that there aren't like equity issues in terms of certain opportunities may cost too much. You could think about things like study abroad that straddle that academic and student affairs, cost does become an issue. So that would be my answer. Like I need to know where you're situated and that will help direct you to how you can engage this conversation.

There are very simple things you can do as a faculty member, even if you were just to write out all your expectations on your syllabus. My students used to be so mad at me because I had like a ten-page syllabus before you even got to the reading list.

I don't have time to read this whole thing. Just tell me- [crosstalk]

Dr. Joan: That's what your blessing is. That's where your blessing is.

Dr. Melissa: I'm telling you all the hidden expectations that I have for you, that will matter for you in this class. And so, if you read my syllabus, which is a book at this point, by the time I finish teaching, but it'll tell you how do I want you to address me when you email me? Why are office hours is useful? It was long. There was no getting around it but it told you exactly how many times you needed to contribute to a discussion a week for participation account. Because again, it took more time on my end, but that was a small contribution for me, a sole faculty member and I came, it was not as large as Rutgers, but from a large university context, that was my in-of-one effort to be more equitable before I moved into equity work more squarely. But again, where are you entering? Is there one thing you can do? And if there is, I would encourage you to do that thing. That can be, again, your in of one effort to make New Brunswick a more hospitable place for whoever is coming into your orbit.

Dr. Joan: Uh-hmm. Oh, all I hear is a centering of the margins. Who has access so if we look at folks at the margins or who have been historically marginalize, how do we do that? And I thought that your example around your syllabus which I'm going to ask you for an old syllabus that intro part because I'll be fascinated to see it, of what that looks like to just make it plain, as my grandma said, "Just make it plain so that people don't have to guess." And within the framework of all that's laid out, then they know how to move, they know where to start the question of, where they're lost to where they got confused that and you're doing it.

What I love about educational equity work is that it's focused on how do we support the people who, historically, are the least resourced, in air quotes here, because some of the way we construct that it's kind of like all over, but when you center them and say, If I can give them everything they need and they're good, people who have more resources than that, are still going to do just fine. So the student whose doesn't have a family history of college, who has this 12-page syllabus is like, what in the world is this will do fine. So, will the student who the multi-generational college student, whose grandparents were tenured faculty at the school where they're now also a legacy, right?

So, that's it for this part. Let's go to Office Hours.

This episode of the show is called Office Hours. It's where we ask our guests to share resources, that will help us learn more about the topic of the episode.

Dr. Wooten, what do you recommend our audience, read, watch, or listen to that will give them a better understanding of educational equity?

Dr. Melissa: That is an excellent question. In some ways, I'm actually just like a huge fan of documentaries. And so for me, I think about the more recent documentary on Historically Black Colleges like "Tell Them We are Rising." But I also think about more random documentaries that I've run across, they aren't like produced for PBS, but they might end up on PBS. And so like years ago, there was this documentary called "Boys of Baraka" that was about, I think, it was boys from Baltimore, they were elementary school students and they got the chance to go- I'm about to be real bad and basic here- they got to go somewhere on the African continent. I cannot remember the country. I know that Africa is a continent, not a country, but they got to go somewhere on the Africa continent for a study abroad experience. But in chronicling that, their pathway, it talked about issues related to educational equity in a very accessible way.
I think about the documentary that chronicled Little Rock High School at the 50th anniversary of integration. I think it's called "Little Rock Central, 50 years later." That one gave an excellent history of what education was like before Brown, the success that Little Rock Central had after it was integrated, and the effects of white flight on school districts in spaces that then became hyper-segregated and predominantly Black.

In that way, it's not that I don't recommend reading because I do, but I actually like documentaries or like reading long-form news articles. And so, I think about like the work that Nikole Hannah Jones did. And this was before she had moved to the New York Times, but she did a series, I'm pretty sure it was for Newsweek around segregation and it covered one family and it talked about how, say like a grandfather, they had all grown up in the same neighborhood. This one family. It was multi-generational. It talked about a grandfather who had attended schools, and I want to say, in like St. Louis before schools were desegregated, then like the father attended the schools during that period of, say like 60's like the 80's when we were really focused on actually desegregating in some meaningful capacity. And so, his opportunities looked very different from the generation before him and then they covered like the final generation that grew up after post-industrialization after white flight.

And so, their opportunities, in some ways, mirrored that grandparent generation. That kind of work, because I feel I could recommend a dozen academic books like that language in much the same way that we talked earlier about hidden curriculum, academic text have their own language that can make them inaccessible in ways that aren't helpful. And so, for that reason, that's why I'm a fan of documentaries and then people who are writing about educational history in a way that most people can grab onto and do something with.

Dr. Joan: That was so good. And folks, this is why you go to office hours. You go talk to your professors and see what they're talking about. They know things. Dr. Wooten, I think class is dismissed. Thanks for coming for the day.

Dr. Melissa: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Joan: Such food for thought and more importantly action. A huge thank you to Dr. Melissa

Wooten for that powerful conversation. I hope it inspired all of us to approach our work with an equity mindset. For a deeper dive into Holding Space, please visit our website at diversity.rutgers.edu/holdingspacepodcast.

You can find breakdowns of each episode that include reflective questions, terminology, and the 'Office Hours' resources. And if you have questions about anything we've talked about, reach out to us at diversity@rutgers.edu.

That's all for our show today. From the Holding Space Team, thanks for listening.

[END]