



Transcript- Episode 75

The “Real World Lie”: Stop Preparing Students for a Life No One Would Choose

How are we at episode 75 already, Kristie? This is awesome.

It makes me feel old. Right? Okay, podcast episode 75. And it's all about we need to stop training kids for a life that none of us would want.

I don't know. Like I needed this years ago. I know.

I think about this in big and small ways. And I think today we're going to go kind of between the micro and the macro when it comes to this concept. And so I'm going to start a little bit at the micro, which is these ideas that we often say in schools, we're preparing students for the real world.

All right. And so what we often mean is that we're saying things like they're going to have to do this as adults. The real world isn't flexible.

Work isn't actually fun. Right? Maybe, unless you work in inclusive school. Well, that's exactly it, Kristie.

Maybe. And that's where we need to go, which is maybe. But adult life actually includes choice, flexibility, accommodations.

You can quit a bad job if you possibly can. It involves remote work. It involves headphones.

It involves breaks. It involves movement. It involves snacks.

It involves legal protections. And we have an outdated idea of the real world and what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. And what we're often thinking is almost a factory-based job that, you know, the whistle blows and you get time off, et cetera.

We know our systems are designed in those ways. And yet our real world has evolved in so many ways. And yet we're still preparing kids for the whistle-to-whistle kind of idea.

Well, and Julie, I think it still has so much to do with colonialism and the whiteness of the culture that we live in, our ideas about the role of education. And, you know, even before the pandemic, you know, you and I talk a lot about what is the definition of inclusive

education. I would invite people always to say, what is the purpose of early care and education? We've taken the word care out of it and just called it early childhood education.

But it's really early care and education. Well, what does that mean? And so, like, just, like, what is the purpose of education, which I know we can't conquer in this episode. But I do think that kind of wondering is, like, when did we decide kids should sit in desks? When did we decide that these were the standards of the next century learner? Like, where do they stem from? And for me, they stem from the white dominant culture and a lot of our ideals around what it means to be a good human.

And so, like, that's where it starts to get really messy as well for me. Absolutely. And, you know, schools are not built for variation.

They're not built for neurodiversity. They're not built for variation. And so put all that together.

And we're asking some micro and macro questions today. And I just want it to open up. It's not going to be a super linear podcast.

But I wanted to open up different thoughts in your head about how do we make our schools more like real life. Meaning more like adult real life. Meaning with more choices built in.

With more flexibility. With more accommodations. With options to quit.

With, you know, remote work. With headphones. With breaks.

With movement. All those pieces are part of the real world that we want to bring into schools instead. Well, Julie, we always say that disability is just human diversity.

In the real world. Yeah. We're working hard all the time to value and honor the diversity and to make the workplace, the community a sense of belonging.

Not everyone is working towards that goal. But for those of us who are committed to this work around equity and sense of belonging and fairness and liberation, then these are the ideals that we want to uphold. And our educational system should mirror that future reality.

Yeah. I want to just give like a few different examples of this. So I'm just going to kind of go through a couple examples.

So school says sit still for seven hours. But adult reality says that's unhealthy and HR would intervene. Yeah.

Hopefully. I mean, I got to talk in HR at my job, but that's all. We won't get into that.

Different story. Different story. School says do the work you hate exactly as assigned without complaint.

People are like, that's my job description, Julie. No. If you look closely, you redesign, you delegate, you automate, or you leave.

If we have the flexibility to do that, that's what it looks like. If we have the privilege to do that. The privilege to do that.

School says you must earn access to comfort, movement, or choice. Those are basic working conditions, says adult reality. Did we have a union? Right.

You can unionize. School says your needs are disruptive. Adult reality says needs can be negotiated, accommodated, and protected.

And so this big, bad real world isn't what we need to prepare kids for. And we even do something kind of more significant for kids with disabilities. Yeah.

I think that's the real inequity starts to show up, Julie. That like, this is the one place where all does mean all. Meaning like, we're generally doing this bad for everybody, but then we actually do it even worse.

The more you are not white, the more you are not nondisabled, the more you don't speak English, the more you don't follow binary gender trends, right? The more you're away from that dominant culture, the more we take away choice, take away acceptance, take away options. That's right. Yeah, because you don't have the privilege.

That's right. That's right. And so we're going to kind of go to the worst variation of this concept, which is called life skills rooms.

Is this macro or micro at this perspective? For me, it's like the macro. So I'm going from like small things all day, every day for all kids that are problematic in schools. And then I'm bringing it to the macro to go, we have huge systems prepared to get kids ready for the real world.

Because we have buildings or classrooms or programs district-wide. Okay. Yeah.

And these are the ones that actually make me... So Kristie and I have visited, I would say collectively, I'll just speak for myself, Kristie. I've probably visited 200 different segregated class, more than that, for sure. 500 classrooms? Oh, yeah.

Oh, yeah. And we spend time looking at these places and spaces that are often called life skills rooms. I've taught in them, Julie.

Kristie spent a longer time than I have. And I'm older than you. So this is a sad story today, but yes, we have deep and wide experience.

Now, before we go any further, just like I interrupted you, but Julie, we often see, and this happens on social media all the time when we talk about life skills rooms, we hear from life skills teachers. Yeah. And they say, hey, my classroom is the only place the kid is not bullied.

My classroom is the only place that the kid is honored or their needs are met. My classroom is not a bad place. So could you speak a little bit to, I don't know if it's intention versus impact, because I think it's true.

I think it is often true that this is a place where a student is welcome or allowed to be diverse. That doesn't make it right or okay. But we're not saying all life skills classroom teachers are bad people or harming their kids.

Do you know what I mean? Yeah. It's going to be both sides of my mouth, I know. Yeah, no.

So, I mean, it's a systems problem. It's a problem to say that kids with disabilities need more, quote, unquote, life skills than everybody else. It's a systems problem to say that we're going to work on laundry and cleaning and a certain level and type of skill in certain rooms but not others.

And does it mean that the folks that work in those places are bad people? Absolutely not. And I will say, Kristie, a lot of people say to me, no, no, no, my classroom isn't that way. And then I walk in there.

Yeah. And I find it to feel like 1950. Literally just the other day we were in a classroom where they were working on how to write out days of the week in cursive.

All these kids with disabilities in one room because they might, quote, unquote, have to put it on a check at some point. And I don't know, Kristie, if you've ever written a check before, but I doubt you wrote the word the day of the week and the whole thing. I haven't even written a check in this century probably.

Exactly. Exactly. That's the thing is when we look in life skills classrooms, we see people preparing for outdated pasts and futures.

And so kids with disabilities get the worst version of this, which means we're going to prepare you for a life we don't want, a life with fewer choices, a life with more monitoring, a life with very, very, very, very low expectations, a life with constant correction and reduced autonomy. I would also say repetition. Did you have that on your list anywhere? No, thank you, Kristie.

Because, you know, like the life skills classroom we were in the other day about where the kids, I don't know, they must have been middle school, maybe early high school. They were still practicing the five senses. Oh, yeah.

And that's like, oh, my gosh, we teach, you know, and I don't remember who we were with, but somebody was like, don't they teach that in preschool? We're like, yes, but if you're a student with a disability, you get it in preschool, kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, you know, you keep getting it. That's right. I was in a self-contained classroom in a state in the Midwest where they were reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* every morning.

Yeah. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* every morning with high-school-age students with autism. It's a fine book.

Don't get us wrong, Eric, but you know. Right. It is a fine book.

I enjoy the book once, twice, maybe once a year. I don't know. If you're a preschool teacher, sure, you've had to read it a hundred million times.

Sure. But. That's where it should end.

That's where we see that repetition. Yeah. Low expectations.

And the concept being that kids are going to have to master this idea of sitting still in a circle and listening to a picture book, I guess, even when they're in high school because they haven't mastered it yet, question mark. I mean, some of it, I just don't even understand why we're doing the things we're doing in these quote-unquote life skills rooms. But I will tell you that after visiting as many as we visited, the practice in general needs to stop and we need to start to give kids access to things like, I don't know, content, curriculum, and peers without disabilities, higher expectations, support, leadership, creativity, self-expression, independence, the things that really, really we want to see in the real world.

Well, how to navigate relationships, how to have friendships, how to keep a job like that's all this human interaction stuff and interacting with people. Now, people are going to say kids are going to get bullied. And, you know, we just got an email the other day from a friend saying that a kid was being bullied because their sibling has Down syndrome.

So it wasn't even the kid with the disability being bullied. It was a sibling. Yeah.

This crap happens all the time. And that's why we have to start early and throughout our communities for acceptance and learning how to navigate when we are different, have different perspectives and different preferences, and how to form friendships and be okay with like, not everybody has to be my friend, but I don't tell you, you know, you're an idiot. Go away.

I find some other skills to say, I don't want to play with you. That's right. That's right.

So we have a download today. That's kind of exciting. And it's really about how to close down those life skills rooms and Kristie telling where they can get this download and why they might want to access it and kind of what's there.

So just give us the whole scoop. I'll give you the quick overview. So, like Julie said, we're kind of doing micro and macro at some point.

We want you to take action. So this handout is that [inclusiveschooling.com/download75](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download75) and it's titled 12 steps to closing life skills rooms. Now, as all things, Julie, like, you might not call it a life skills room.

So you're like, this is not for me. Well, look at some of our other episodes where we said, stop using behavior charts. And then people go, but we use unicorns.

And we're like, no, that's still a behavior chart. Right. So this might take some time for you to go.

Oh, are we still doing these harmful outdated practices, even though we call it something different? All right. So this handout at [inclusiveschooling.com/download75](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download75) gives you 12 ways to start moving away from these practices that are harmful. And again, this is just like our work around racism.

If you're white and you're like, hey, somebody's calling me a racist, that makes me a bad person. Those are not the same thing. You can be racist.

I find myself tone policing people, gaslighting people. I don't mean to do it, but I totally do it. Macroaggressions, microaggressions, whatever you want to pick out in terms of my whiteness. Same thing with ableist. The other day, Julie and I were talking about March Madness. And she's like, can we call it something different? I'm like, no, it's March Madness.

It's basketball. And she's like, and it's also ableist. And it's like, so I was using ableist language, but that doesn't mean I'm this horrible person.

I just need to change and take action. So for me, Julie, these 12 steps are acknowledging that we've got ableist practices, big or small, right? Macro or micro. And we have to take action.

Yeah. And so this download is going to help you take action. And there are two really important ways to take action on this download.

Take a look at these places and spaces in your school and ask yourself, whose life are we training kids for here? And why would we want that for them? So that 12 Steps to Closing Life Skills Rooms resource is really good. And then if you're interested in sort of the bigger conversation, which would be, how do I make our entire school more inclusive? We've got a link to the book, [The Way to Inclusion: How Leaders Create Schools Where Every Student Belongs](#), which would be really helping you look systematically, thing by thing, at micro and macro levels of preparing kids for a life that is not what we would want for them. Thank you for tuning in.

And don't forget to subscribe and catch up on past episodes, where we share valuable insights, straight talk, and practical steps to challenge outdated special education practices. You can find every episode with the show notes at [inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast) to help build more inclusive schools together.

SHOW NOTES

In this episode, Julie and Kristie challenge one of the most persistent ideas in schools: that students need to be prepared for a rigid, unforgiving “real world.” They look at how that belief shows up in everyday expectations and, at its most harmful, in segregated “life skills” rooms that can reduce choice, access, and expectations for students with disabilities.

Key Takeaways

- Adult life often includes choice, flexibility, accommodations, breaks, movement, and legal protections. School should not be more rigid in the name of preparing students for adulthood.
 - “Preparing students for the real world” can become an excuse for unnecessary compliance instead of an opportunity to teach agency, self-advocacy, and meaningful independence.
 - Students with disabilities often experience the most restrictive version of this thinking through segregated programs, outdated tasks, repetition, low expectations, and reduced autonomy.
 - The problem is systemic. Naming problems with life skills rooms is not the same as blaming the educators who work in them.
 - Real-life learning includes access to age-respectful content, peers without disabilities, relationships, choice, creativity, self-expression, leadership, and authentic participation.
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Answering a Common Question

What should we ask when reviewing a “life skills” classroom, program, or space?

“Whose life are we training kids for here? And why would we want that for them?”

Then look closely at whether students have access to age-respectful learning, grade-level content, peers without disabilities, meaningful choice, relationships, autonomy, and the kinds of experiences that actually matter in adult life.

Episode Download / Handout

12 Steps to Closing Life Skills Rooms and Opening Possibilities for Students

This resource gives you 12 practical ways to examine segregated “life skills” practices and start moving toward more inclusive possibilities for students.

You'll use it to:

- Look at current classrooms, programs, and routines through an inclusion lens;
- Identify outdated or ableist practices, even when they are called something other than “life skills”;
- Consider what students may be missing when they are separated from content, peers, and authentic school experiences; and
- Choose concrete next steps that increase access, belonging, autonomy, and higher expectations.

👉 Get the handout at: inclusiveschooling.com/download75

Practical Moves to Try

- Notice when “the real world” is being used to justify a rule, routine, or lack of flexibility. Ask whether adults actually live or work under the same conditions.
 - Build choice, movement, breaks, accommodations, and flexibility into school now rather than treating them as something students must earn.
 - Review “life skills” curriculum for age-respect, relevance, and whether students are repeating skills long after their peers have moved on.
 - Ask whether a skill can be taught in an inclusive classroom, school, or community context alongside peers instead of in a separate room.
 - Increase opportunities for content, relationships, leadership, creativity, self-expression, and genuine independence.
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Additional Resources

[Everything You Need to Know \(and Be Able to Do\) to Close Life Skills Rooms:](#) A collection of Inclusive Schooling tools for leaders and teams working to move away from segregated life skills rooms and toward inclusive services and supports.

[Inclusion Podcast Episode 31: Understanding LRE and Its Role in Supporting All Learners:](#) Julie and Kristie unpack Least Restrictive Environment and the supports schools should consider before moving a student into a more restrictive placement.

[The Way to Inclusion: How Leaders Create Schools Where Every Student Belongs:](#) For the bigger systems conversation, this book gives school and district leaders a practical path for examining structures, services, staffing, and practices that shape inclusive education.

Join thousands of educators making inclusion work.

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