

Mike: Alright yall, so everyone knows that childcare is essential. We're some of the most influential people out there. Yet, we are often under paid and overworked. So how can you work full-time, have hobbies, show your friends and family love, self-care, and also fine tune your skills and grow more in-depth? That's where we come in. These napcasts, 25, 30 minute segments are designed to help you learn on the go, hear another perspective, spark debate, agree incessantly, and honestly, remind you that you're not alone. We live in a complex world, so allow us to challenge your perspective. So, are your headphones in? Did you turn the volume up? Alright now. Let's get it.

Mike: Welcome to Napcast, a podcast produced by Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, Washington, on the traditional lands of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish Tribe. Welcome back this is Episode 4! Its good to be back and recording together.

As always, my name is Mike Browne, pronouns are he/him

Nick: And I'm Nick Terrones, pronouns are he/him. What we got on the docket for today Mike?

Mike: I was at work yesterday and it was nothing but meetings on meetings on meetings. 6 of them in an 8 hour day.

It was crazy—I mean it was nuts.

Side note, I'm working on reconstructing my language and not using the word like crazy or insane because in my spare time, I work with vulnerable populations and some of them do suffer from mental illness and using crazy, just doesn't sit right with me anymore.

And Obviously there's no language police that'll force people to stop saying this word. It's an individual choice.

But anyways, it was too much and I almost yelled at my assistant for scheduling my Tuesday like that, then I remembered, I'm my own assistant.

But it got me thinking. When did I get my hands in all these different pots? I was meeting about infant-toddler mental health with advocates from around the region, then about COVID relief plans for the state of Washington, then another on workforce development etc.

I said it before in episode one, I'm more than just what my title says. I'm more than the community engagement manger. I'm doing a little bit of everything. And I know you swim in similar waters. You got a rolodex worth of projects. So, I wanted to bring that to the table here to chat about today.

You ready to jump into it?

Nick: For sure, let's do it!

Mike: Let's boogie, sooo, let's talk about your growth in this field. You wrestle children in the am, write a book at lunch, and give presentations at night. And it wasn't always like that though. So, take us through your progression from educator to somewhat of a master teacher.

Nick: Hahaha, I like the wording of 'somewhat master teacher,' because I think that'll always be true for me, and honestly I never want to be a master at something, because to me it implies an ending of knowledge, like I've learned all that could be learned. Experienced teacher for sure, master....not so much.

As a very young child I had always enjoyed school, and during those years I definitely picked up on the teacher-student dynamic: how this grown up outside of your family could also help you grow, feel confident, and bring out aspects of yourself that maybe get overlooked by family members. Teachers and coaches provide a different perspective for a young human about themselves.

So those early positive experiences motivated me to want to be an educator of some sort. Fast forward a couple of decades, and I go to college (Go Cougs) with the mindset of pursuing an elementary education degree--I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. As I began my studies, I became privy to the fact that there were and had been a strong science behind early childhood....people were taking preschool seriously! My mind was blown, and so I began to dive deeper into all aspects about early childhood education.

During that journey, in one of my classes, we watched a video published by Hilltop--where we work now--and the pedagogy and intention behind it inspired me so greatly, motivated me to want to be immersed in a classroom. And I thought it would be cool to work at Hilltop, and so I applied and 14 years later....here we are

Mike: Oh snap really? I didn't even know that about you. I just figured you were like me when I first got out of college... throw spaghetti at a wall and apply to thousands of jobs in hopes someone will pay you... so you can pay down your college debt.

Haha alright so when did it hit you that you have a story to tell that not only children wanted to hear but also your peers and colleagues in this industry needed to hear?

Nick: Ask my parents, or anyone in my family--I always had something to say! Running my mouth often got me in trouble--and sometimes still does, but also I had moments where I realized my ideas could have an impact. My passion for education and the potential of young children was there in me, but it was very vague and needed some direction. I had something to say, but I didn't know what exactly.

During my first few months at Hilltop, I became intrigued in some children's conversation about what they were noticing in their play: what items sank or float in the sensory table filled with water. I brought my observations to a team meeting and was encouraged by my teaching team and mentor teacher---Ann Pelo---to turn this into an In Depth Investigation, which is an extensive study with the children about their ideas and observations. During the 6 months we did this work, Ann and I talked extensively about what we had been seeing, and it was like, and is, like being a scientist! At some point in the year Ann came to me and asked if I wanted to help her write an article about this project we had been doing with the children for Exchange Magazine, and I totally jumped at the opportunity!

It was that acknowledgement and mentoring Ann gave and still gives me, that launched me into my educator trajectory I've been on. Ann's acknowledgement of what I was capable of--even when I couldn't see it--spurred me in finding my voice as an educator, so that I could share the stories of my experience with children. Of course, this took some time and practice before the momentum really got going!

Mike: Nick, one of the greatest things about our people – BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, People of color - is that we have always been great orators. From myths to poetry, storytelling is something ingrained in us. Did you wake up one day and it suddenly clicked? That you had this arsenal of experiences and insights that had to be told? Walk us through that process of self-actualization and your path to discovering, to finding your voice... What did it look like for you?

Nick: Yeah man, well I gotta say my mother is an awesome storyteller, and I remember that being a big part of my childhood! She'd tell me all kinds of crazy stories! And I have always had a joy when it came to reading and writing. So, it has always been in me, the idea of storytelling.

But my educator voice was different: for a good while it lacked the teaching-experience. I needed the experience to put words to my passion for teaching and learning. And that passion needed some kind of framework to be cohesive, relatable, and hopefully inspiring. The framework that really helped me reign it all in was how we reflect our curriculum at Hilltop: pedagogical documentation and learning stories. These methods could also be considered our "lesson plans." Through continuous practice of writing, reflecting, peer editing, writing, and more reflecting, I had been able to hone in a way that worked for me to reflect my thinking and really identify my interests, values, and ideas in this world of early childhood education. This process helped me identify what it is that I bring to the table when spending time with children and their families, as well as my colleagues.

Mike: While I took a different route to get to Hilltop and ECE, you've been here right from the jump. The topics I love to talk about is centered around the confluence of racism and organizations. Now I get to talk about things such as Anti-Blackness in Early Learning. Previous jobs it's been things such as racism and quality of life or creating resilient neighborhoods of color in urban places.

So, real quick do you have a niche?

Nick: Yeah, I'd say it's my work with the World Forum Foundation on trying to achieve gender balance in our workforce. Also, I'm really fond of Rough n Tumble Play with kids as well. Its a way to tackle socially constructed norms and a way to get toddlers and preschoolers wiggles out and for them to engage their whole bodies.

Mike: I know you got tons of presentations rearing to go. So if you want to bring Nick out, email us at institute@hilltopcc.org

I had to do a little plug for you bro. You know I got you haha. Alright, so getting back on track,

Now, I'm pretty sure my coach was saying this in reference to a team we were playing, who had this cat who had just committed to Michigan as a running back and was 6ft 225 pound. And they were telling me to go for the legs and live to see another day.

Shoutout to my high school coaches, Brandon Harris, Rich Robbins, and Canisius Highschool Football back in Buffalo, NY.

But my coaches said it best. "You have decisions to make. As you move up the ranks, you have to look and operate yourself as a business."

And I bring that up, because you're also a brand. You're also your own company. You might not have LLC after your name but the way I look at it, whatever you put out in the world is a reflection upon who you are. So what are some of the guiding principles and questions you ask yourself as you get started with a new project to make sure it's an endeavor you want to take and that its brand and values aligned.

Nick: Well if I'm a business, it's definitely being a non-profit business like the majority of educators! As my experience and opportunities have emerged over the years, I have found that aligning my values to choices in projects is essential for because I like to be as authentic as possible---in everything I do. If i feel like I'm just going along with the motions of a project, feel like I'm putting too much of myself aside,

or just generally do not feel psyched about it, then I know I'm not going to bring my best to the endeavor; and my best is being authentic.

Also, I really consider what growth I can get out of a project: how could I be challenged? What skills and dispositions will this strengthen and even be put into check? How will I be able to share new information out paired with my experience and perspective?

Similarly, I like to think about what can I bring to these new endeavors: where I can I provide challenge and growth based on my experience and perspective? How could I provide balance? How could I best represent my identities in an authentic and equitable way? How could I help champion and sustain the project's mission or goals?

Like any healthy relationship, projects and professional endeavors can only be sustained when there's a balanced give and take/a push-pull dynamic.

Mike: You're talking with that wisdom from someone whose been in the game for a long time now. Over a decade. Has that changed from when you were just starting out?

Nick: Most definitely, Mike! Like we touched on earlier, I didn't really have a guided voice or direction. I believe some people enter this profession with one and/or it doesn't take them very long to figure it out. But, as we've seen in many other situations, when you're sort of in a marginalized position--being a male of color in ECE in my case--you need someone to help you identify and bring out your voice. Give you a sense of power and belonging. Along the way, I've been able to find a sense of flexibility a balance of expectation that as much as I'd like to be heard, I need to be willing to listen equally or more. I've been better at exercising the fact that even though I have experiences and perspectives others may want to hear, I am not the only one, you know? There's always room for collaboration and growth. And really that, what did spider-man's uncle say: With great power comes great responsibility. So in the last several years, I'm thinking of how could I use my opportunities and privilege to bolster other people.

Mike: It's so important that we capacity build. It doesn't have to be called a mentorship or anything like that, although it can be, but it's vital that we continue to build people's capacity, especially young Black and Brown educators or young people's capacity to do this work.

Each step of the way, I had someone above me, showing me how to operate a fax machine, advising me on how to negotiate conflict, giving me opportunities to lead and facilitate meetings. Invaluable things that I carry to this day, and now am looking to pass on to others. This napcast is a way to do that on a grander scale.

It's so crucial that we take the time to do that for our people and to build structures like we have here at Hilltop to empower educators and allow them to work on their craft and leadership ability so when the time comes and you're ready to assume a program supervisor position, or executive director, you're ready and can carry the torch, so to speak.

Mike: So Nick, help our listeners understand this a bit better. Soon after realizing you were more than just an educator of young children, you started to dabble into writing projects and speaking engagements. Which helped give birth to Hilltop Educator Institute, where we provide culturally sustaining PD opportunities for educators of young children.

You had a steady hand in crafting that for us.

For organizations seeking to do the same or for individuals looking to branch out, what were some of the questions, actions, thoughts you had to ask to spur Hilltop to action. To facilitate your own development and bear that responsibility to act?

Nick: I wouldn't say that I had a steady hand in crafting as so much that maybe myself, along with other educators helped Hilltop's Institute Leadership, the brain power behind the idea, realize that there was and is a wealth of experience, perspective, leadership, and information to be tapped into.

Actually Mike, I want to hear your reflection of how you've adapted and grown. Because you didn't come to Hilltop as an educator or even with any experience in the classroom, right? And here you are speaking the language, living the values, you have steadily steered Hilltop in the direction in which we all wanted to see our Institute grow, and you've effectively and authentically made connections beyond what others had been able to do...like at the city and state level! I mean that's awesome man, and I'm always so happy to know you and proud of you as a friend. Had this kind of work, social justice education, always been in your wheelhouse? Did it sort of overtake you as your role grew here?

Mike: Man, I thought I was the one asking the questions, haha.

Momma, growing up, she had her own family childcare center. 15 years. Honestly, unknowingly, she built in my love for children. I'll never admit that to her, but I appreciated the love, the passion she brought to her job, despite the payout being so low, and even to this day, still has relationships with the children she watched.

And that was the extent of my ECE experience. I went off to business school and got my master's in marketing out in London, England.

This field is still quite foreign to me. I'm super young in it. 3 years and some change really if you don't count my job handing out snacks afterschool growing up with mom!

Like most organizations, it's hard to put trust in Black and Brown leadership. Let alone an outsider so to speak, let alone someone who wanted to come in and fundamentally change the vision of how we outreach, advocate, and run our institute. It took time to get buy-in. It took time to build relationships. It took time to shift the narrative of who Hilltop was in the community. Make no mistake about it. We still predominately serve white children. About 70%. We still have to charge for our professional development because the people we want to deliver workshops are of the highest quality.

But the things I really believe have helped me guide the vision of our institute is the fact that:

1. Y'all out there are the experts. Y'all are on the ground. Y'all are getting muddy, y'all are sparking true joy in these children and building on the wonders of childhood. I trust y'all. Y'all call me out when my ideas are not sustainable, y'all push me to think radically because our industry needs to be. One have one shot at childhood. We can't afford to mess it up.

2. It's not about if we can do it, it's about how we can do it. It was a tiny shift in my thinking years ago that I bring to the table here today. You would have brought Hilltop the idea of a napcast 4 years ago, and you would have been laughed at. You bring an idea here now and it gets done. We're much more flexible in our thinking and that has trickled down to all of our offerings. It's no longer a pop in the CD and press play model. We constantly are asking ourselves, how do we get better, how do we improve, how do we make this more accessible, what does our community needs now, what does the community need in 5 years and how do we build systems so that when 2025 hits, we're ready for ya.
3. Lastly, it's about action and accountability. Those are the two principles I've been embedding within Hilltop. We talk a lot about equity in education and we are holding ourselves accountable to make sure we aren't just doing lip service. Since I got here and held our feet to the fire, we've revamped our admission policies, we're investing people power in raising funds and scholarships, we're working on eliminating language barriers, we're partnering with community based organizations and redistributing the income from our workshops, we're showing up in spaces not for personal gain but to ensure we're supporting in the overall liberation movement of yes – Black and Brown educators in this industry but the liberation of our industry as a whole.

There's definitely more but that could be a whole episode itself haha....

Mike: We'll be right back..

Commercial: Hilltop Children's Center is a high quality preschool, afterschool program, and professional development institute of early learning and inquiry serving the Seattle community since 1971. Together, we are working with the next generation of inventors, leaders, thinkers, artists, and social activists. For more information on our professional development and community outreach including workshops, presentations, blogs, coaching and consulting, and of course, this napcast, please visit www.hilltopcc.com

Mike: Nick, I want to spend the rest of our time here together discussing the barriers we all face but especially male educators of color face in accessing quality professional development.

Like most of us, we leave our teacher-prep classes, knowledgeable of the content, of many creative pedagogical strategies, but for some, we can't always figure out how to place ourselves in the classroom- as in, who we are as a teacher?

Thinking back at one of my very first professional experiences, albeit it was in a consulting firm and not childcare, in which my employer gave me hypothetical quarterly tasks where I had to provide anecdotal or narrative evidence to support each business decision I made.

While, it definitely felt like homework, it provided me a platform and the space to interrogate some of my long-held beliefs of how decisions should be made. It gave me an opportunity to examine the often unexamined beliefs I had from other jobs and based off of what I had read in textbooks in college.

Essentially, what I'm saying is that it really helped me re-conceptualize abstract ideas and philosophies as concrete images.

So kicking it to you, what can we do to help new educators of color develop yes, their teaching identity, and also their professional identity?

Nick: Accessibility. You and I have talked about it on numerous occasions: redistributing power, and many times power falls into the accessibility of resources. Also, though I do think that people of color need to dig deep and find avenues of empowerment within themselves, and that's going to look different for each individual. Early Childhood Education is an underdog field so we all have to try harder, put in more, and expect less. We do it because we know the value it carries for society as a whole. And the stark reality is, there still may not be help or value for ECE for quite some time---but that doesn't mean we give up! The biggest thing any new educator, especially new educators of colors, could and should do is get out there and seek out groups and organizations. What're you interested in? What sparks your curiosity and imagination? What do you want to know more about? There are groups out there for soooooo many things these days! Find your niche...which reminds me Mike, maybe we can get some links to groups put up. Also, all you experienced educators out there, find the youngins' and share your expereicnes and resources: be a friendtor (that's friend and mentor).

One thing I wanted to mention in the second podcast-Deathmetal and Toddlers-is that one of the reasons I really love the field of ECE is that it's ethos and spirit are similar to heavy metal: DIY...do it yourself. And with that, I feel like there can and should be plenty of room to be yourself, be authentic.

Mike: Despite how rewarding this field is, this industry is considered low-status, is filled with gender bias, and many of us work in difficult conditions.

Combine that with the fact that many of us are not being compensated for extra hours, or when we actually do engage in professional development, we're not seeing it result in promotion or validation, thus many educators resist engaging outside their 40 hour work week because they have spent so much energy just trying to emotionally and physically survive.

What can education systems (think Dept of Education, your school's leadership, task forces out there in the community etc.) do to enhance the conditions we work in?

Nick: Yes pay us more and it's more than that. If you're serious about uplifting educators, elevating our status as an industry, rejuvenating us to take up a professional development workshop on a Saturday outside of our normal work week, here's just a list of things we need to see in order to...

1. Seek our input or voice on decisions that affect us at the level were standards are made.

Mike: And not just tokenize us by getting us to the table and listening and then not implementing our ideas. Believe us. Listen to us. Trust us and implement our ideas.

Nick: Absolutely. More things I'm thinking of includes:

2. Set up systems of support, again with educators leading the way-and have these systems be relevant to the communities they serve.
3. Center racial equity and anti-racism
4. Deconstruct gender norms: Expect and encourage male involvement starting at the Nursery School level.
5. Let ideas and plans, especially ones that attempt to honor children and families, have a chance--- too many times they're short lived because of political input.

Mike: As this episodes states, you're more than just an educator. We've focused earlier on how you've developed as more than just someone in the classroom and have become a writer, a podcast host, a highly sought-after speaker.

There might be some people out there who says... actually, Mike, nah, I don't want to be any of that. I just want to be an educator. What do you say to that?

Nick: That's perfectly fine. And also, by the very nature of our profession, we cannot be. This is the concept of the Role of the Teacher and how it coincides with the Image of the Child. If it's your first time hearing those concepts: Role of the Teacher and Image of the Child...stay tuned! We're going to dive deeper into that next napcast!

In our choice of being an educator we also assume many roles--some are conscious choices, some not. How we want education experiences to look will later reflect how we view our societies, and this thinking informs the roles we take on:

1. We are researchers when we observe and take children's photograph, write down their thoughts and create meaning out of it.
2. We are therapists when we help children and families navigate through murky emotions and tricky situations.
3. We are party planners when we find new and exciting ways to introduce new cultures and celebrations into the classroom.
4. We are activists when we challenge children's unconscious bias that comes out in their language and play, and when we have complex conversations with them about their observations.
5. We are curators of society.

We might say we are educators to our friends and family. But we're not. We play so many different roles for young children which is why being in ECE is so fun. It's why I am so proud. It's why I do not want to leave.

Mike: Many of Hilltop's professional development offerings are developed by me or a combination of folks who are in the classroom, in the community, and are coaches, mentor teachers, or education directors. That doesn't hold true for most organizations.

Full disclosure, I have my pen out, I'm about to take notes but I want to know, what am I missing? What do I need to know about you as an educator of color in the classroom, to help bring high-quality, relevant, timely, and engaging professional development to you that you'll embrace?

Nick: Actually Mike, I'm wondering if this question is better answered by our audience. So I'm going to invite the audience and everyone out there listening to shoot us an email and send us your thoughts on what you need. Not only will we try and implement them over here but we'll share it out for all the other PD folks out there and people in your position Mike so that we can share the knowledge and wealth.

Mike: Alright audience, you have your homework. You can email your thoughts to institute@hilltopcc.org. Here are the questions and don't just think about what you want Nick and I to cover but think about these questions and bring it to your coach, mentor teachers, your admin, your district and to yourself, right, take your learning into your own hands and critically reflect on these questions:

1. What are you missing from your own professional development?
2. If you're white, what do you need to know about your colleague, whose an educator of color in the classroom in order to support them in their journey?
3. If you're an educator of color, what organizational supports do you need to feel empowered in this work?

4. For everyone, reimagine your PD days. What structures do you need, what supports can you advocate for, how can you communicate your needs as an individual and as a collective to ensure these opportunities are high-quality, relevant, timely, and culturally sustaining?

Nick: Mike, I don't think we got it under 30 minutes this time haha.

Mike: Not even close but its good content and we'll continue to work at it and get better. I appreciate you brother. I couldn't do it with you and the audience out there listening as well.

Nick: Same here man. Thank you and we look forward to hearing your thoughts, email them in!

Mike: We have one shot at being kiddos. Before the bills, before the drama, before responsibilities. Let's make sure we give them a joyous one. Until next time y'all take care.