

[00:00:00] Bonni Stachowiak: Today on episode number 313 of the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, José Luis Vilson shares about his book, *This Is Not A Test*.

[00:00:12] Production Credit: Produced by Innovate Learning, maximizing human potential.

[music]

[00:00:19] Bonni: Hello and welcome to this episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'm Bonni Stachowiak. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

[music]

José Luis Vilson is a full-time math teacher, writer, speaker, and activist in New York City, New York. He's the author of *This Is Not A Test, A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education*. He's spoken about education, math, and race for a number of organizations and publications, including the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *tED*, *Eldiario*, *La Prensa*, and *The Atlantic*. He's a national board-certified teacher, a math for America master teacher and the executive director of EduColor, an organization dedicated to race and social justice issues and education. José, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

[00:01:30] José Luis Vilson: Thank you for having me.

[00:01:31] Bonni: My kids at school-- there's a librarian there who I love, and she had my son do an exercise the other day. Maybe you've seen something like this before, José, it's an iceberg, but it's about your identity. It's an exercise where they ask the kids to express what parts of their identity can we see about them or observable about them, and what parts of them weren't. I was cracking up because he had a lot of things about his identity involving him not having any pets. [laughs] I missed. I hope that we've talked with our kids enough about race that something about his race would be on there because I always want them to understand those components. and we've read lots of books and all of that.

It was right there in front of me, but I missed it because all I could see was, poor guy doesn't have any pets, José, and that's in there like four times. [laughs] I'm curious, José, what would you share with us about your identity iceberg? What can we see about your identity, and what is unseen?

[00:02:30] José: It's interesting too because this country does a great job of making sure that people start running into what ... are supposed to very quickly. Either you get ashamed of your identity or you are proud of your identity, and that can flow any which way. For me, because of what I see in the mirror daily, I am proud to be a black man in this country regardless and because of what's currently happening and why that's happened over centuries since 1492, 1619, et cetera. It's worth saying though that below that iceberg is a lot of different things for a lot of different people.

I don't have to know how to negotiate that. I'm happy, for example, to be a writer. I believe myself to be a committed writer, a committed friend. Someone who is a committed father as well. Some of those elements start coming above that ocean line as it were because of the public nature of my work. I also find myself in spaces where I'm very spiritual. I've become very spiritual in the last couple of years overtly. Whereas, maybe I was just trying to find my path through religion and spirituality through the vast majority of my life. Those are just some things I think about.

Not to mention, I do like to sing and write poetry, and I appreciate lyricism. I'm a connoisseur of so different types of music. It's interesting even just wearing the skin

that I'm in, people probably wouldn't understand that, but I love reading liner notes. I love looking at samples and trying to dig into the crates as it were. I don't get as much time as I like to, to do that, but whenever I get the opportunity to do it, it's a beautiful thing

[00:04:21] Bonni: At the institution where I work, I was so proud of myself because they wanted to have some more conversations about the faculty research, but that sounded so boring to me to be like, "Come together to here." I just couldn't get a title. I wanted to call it faculty liner notes. I had to explain to them, José, what liner notes are. I just felt so old. [laughs] I was like, "I should not have to explain this," but they're really such a neat concept though. I'm connecting what you said about liner notes with this iceberg thing. Think about what would be on our own liner notes.

I had a friend who I just saw on social media today. She is in a doctor's office right now going through a fertility treatment. She said, she's in the waiting room and they start to play *Old Town Road* and she's like, "I'm never going to be able to listen to this song the same." I'm curious, José, have you had any songs that are taking on new meaning for you in recent weeks or months?

[00:05:18] José: Oh, goodness. It's fascinating. I feel like Donny Hathaway has been a revelation for me recently and not for nothing, but I was listening to Jay-Z's *4:44*, I think it was sometime last year or the year before when he released it. Even though I heard the music before, I didn't quite get the depths of it until he put his own lyrics on it. Then I was like, "Let me go explore why he's bringing up these samples again." Then when I pulled those samples is, "Oh, so this takes on new meaning as a grown man." Versus when you're just hearing it to figure out what music is and where it's coming from.

That's been interesting. Stevie Wonder has a similar vibe to me. Believe it or not, Guns N' Roses as well has been really fascinating to hear in this point in time. Just the levels of anarchy within the music is worth a re-listen.

[00:06:15] Bonni: Tell us about your early years of school and the points in time in your life when you first began to take note of the parts of your identity that could be observed by others and also the parts that were not evident right away.

[00:06:29] José: I always found myself to be a really good student, and that was at the core of what I believe my identity to be at the time. I threw myself into studies because it was ingrained in me that that was the way out of poverty. That was the way out of the nonsense and the mess. It was very much an escape portal for me to get into the studies and recognize that those studies were going to take me somewhere where I wasn't sure, but I just knew it was just going to happen. I also know that along the way though I was put in environments where I was learning, but I was learning something different. In Catholic school when I was getting my communion and my confirmation, for example, I prided myself on being very well versed on what I was being taught.

That was a theme. Then along the way, I was like, "Why do I need to know about the matter of conception again? Why do I need to know about these rites of passage? Why do I need to memorize all these things? Then I didn't understand that religion was just a disciplined form of trying to get to your spirituality. Spirituality can be amorphous until you got some practice going. I wasn't able to see that, but I definitely caught why someone would engage in religion in order to connect to the spirituality. Similarly, I used to be part of the boys and girls club over in the lower east side. Now it's defunct. Now they've changed the whole apparatus. Back then, I was pulled into a group of folks who were trying to teach young black boys and young Latinx boys about their history.

I got to watch *Eyes On The Prize*. I didn't know that *Eyes On The Prize* was going to be such a big deal to my formation, but the imagery that I had in my mind allowed me to develop language for it when I came into college. It was one of the first times when I said, "There's a seed being planted in me. I don't have a language for it, but I know it may be important later." I just studied these things on race." I was very good at being a good school type person. I just didn't realize that all that information I was gathering was going to become something that would eventually make me whole. That's a really critical element to all of that.

[00:08:49] Bonni: I've been intrigued for a long time about-- We want to respect our students and we want to give them that transparency to always be seeking for them to understand those whys. I find what you just described in terms of your Catholic faith, the discipline of spiritual practices. Those things, that, to me, it does seem an impossible to understand those deepest of whys until you're in the practice. Is this something that's come up for you a lot in your teaching or your life you really couldn't explain the why until the person was further into it, the learning and the practice?

[00:09:31] José: For sure. What's more, a lot of people are trying to figure out what the why is for any number of things. Eventually, you start thinking to yourself, "Why human right period?" Then it becomes like, "No, actually the things that we do are the why." We eventually come to the space where it's like, "We've known a lot. In the knowing, we ended up knowing nothing," to paraphrase Confucius. I'd also say too, like, I'm not necessarily that big Catholicism, but I understand why I have to go through it in order to get to the thing that I really wanted.

Specifically, the Jesuit tradition which is being a man for others, that's the service leadership, understanding the context in which we work, those are things that I learned to the Jesuit fathers in Nativity through Xavier High School, which is a paramilitary school for all intensive purposes, all-boys Catholic. Those are lessons that I wouldn't have been able to get pretty much anywhere else. I'm ultimately respectful of that tradition, even if I'm not necessarily all the way aligned with the religion element.

[00:10:41] Bonni: Part of what I'm maybe hearing you say too, is that there's a little bit on my part when I do get a little more hung up on the why is because how do I know what the why is for the student who's in front of me? Just because I think I know what it is, I can't really predict necessarily what it would be for them. It's a really difficult but important tension, I think.

[00:11:04] José: For sure. It's interesting too, because as I'm looking at the black tradition in this country around teaching, what a lot of people either forget or don't know is that when it comes to education, black parents and Latinx parents value it

in at least the top two, if not, number one. They want their children to get education, they want to see that they have great educators who are guiding their children, and they tend to trust a lot of us to do that work. Where we come into conflict is when as a country, we were saying, "These kids can't get educated because they're in poverty."

No, actually, for so many of us we feel like education is a matter of life and death. Without that knowledge then what we don't know can kill us. That's a running theme with so many folks who I speak to on a regular basis. I know that education doesn't always lead to the outcomes we wish. Just being mindful of what education means for so many of us is so critical to what we consider to be life. I think the more that we can lean into that understanding or the different understanding that we walk into in the school building the better.

[00:12:20] Bonni: Would you share a memory about a time that you really felt this connection with being a teacher?

[00:12:27] José: Sure. Even now seems to be a really good memory. This moment reminds me of how often I keep talking about relationships, and how important relationships are to any given moment. Now, we don't have a school building, but we have some sort of vehicle by which we can communicate with our children who were once in front of us. We have these tools where we can see their faces across flat screens, but the energy is just not there. It is just not being able to see somebody when they get it and when it clicks for them, being able to engage in those jokes, those moments of humanity as it were.

The transformative ways that we sit in a classroom and we say, "Hey, let's coalesce around this specific idea." People want to say, "Now, you can replicate that if you just angle your cameras right and make sure there's this." No, that face-to-face interaction is so valuable for me. It is the backbone by which I teach, and I'm struggling now because I don't have it. I feel like an assignment manager because of it. All this does is remind me after 15 years of doing this work, how powerful those interactions were even when, mind you, I wasn't the greatest teacher, even when I felt like I was failing the class when I wasn't doing my best.

9 out of 10 times you ask me to do this over again, I could not unless it was a pandemic. On the flip side of that, if it's the only way I can actually teach, then I'm going to have to do it this way, isn't it? That's the way that works.

[00:14:10] Bonni: Yes. I was so confronted. It happened to be before the pandemic, but the pandemic just amplified it in recognizing my own sense of privilege around trying to set social norms in these online spaces that are just completely inappropriate. Now, I shake my head at myself, but all I can do is just keep learning and recognize my failures as fast as I can and figure out a new way. Even just there's been a lot of discussion about making sure students have their cameras on, "Oh, really? Who is it that is attempting to control that? Do you at all understand the context in which your students are now?" I'd love to hear a little bit about your students, would you tell us about them?

[00:14:49] José: The vast majority of them identify as Latinx or Hispanic, and the vast majority of them are descendants of the Dominican Republic. There is a heavy Hispanic Latinx flavor in our school, and it's evident. Though we also have a large influx of kids that descend from Mexico, from Colombia, from Ecuador even. We have Central and South American influences, along with a number of, I'll call them random in the way of saying that because in Woodland Washington Heights is known as a Dominican neighborhood. It feels like all these other ones like Polish, Irish, Italian. I think there are many kids and African American or other black identifying kids get sprinkled in the mix every so often.

That's the vast majority of our students, and that's their cultural background. I think from that, I can tell you I just have a grand mix of students with different abilities. I do my best to assure that I am attending to the student and attending to the human being. It's very easy for me to sit here and be like, I have this many students who have an IEP, who are English language learners, mostly lingual learners who belong in a ... who got free and reduced lunch. There's a lot of that. Generally speaking, I just have a lot of care for a lot of the kids that I have. Even because and despite whatever challenges they have, they come into my classroom, and I hope to teach them. That's where I'm at.

[00:16:27] Bonni: I'm going to try this out on you, see how I did with this construction here.

[00:16:31] José: I can't wait.

[00:16:33] Bonni: [laughs] José, you teach math, but you also don't teach math. Explain.

[00:16:39] José: There's a saying out there, I don't teach math. I teach students math. I may consider myself a math teacher, but really, I'm teaching students. You put me in any classroom, whether it be the subject about English language arts, which I've done, by the way, I'm like, "Yes, I can do that. Social studies. Yes, I can do that. Science. Yes, I can do that." I feel very confident not because I know the full subject matter, but because I genuinely believe that being able to relate to students and explain to students what's in front of them is such a pillar to any of this stuff.

Whether it's math, science, whatever, I'm going to be able to get through to them what the idea is that I need to get to them. That's why I don't consider myself a math teacher. There's also an element to that I'm going to just go ahead and put out there for everybody is because my public appearances and persona are often tied to issues of race class and social justice, people forget that I teach math. There's a prototype for a math teacher that people don't often understand, that they cling so hard to, that when they see someone like me, they can't imagine that I actually teach math even when we have so many different examples out there of black mathematics teachers who've done this for generations.

Those are just two parts of that. One is my own self-actualization about the way I move about the classroom but the second is very much about how people react to somebody who's not trying to talk about math 24/7, and trying to derive things and create models for things, but is generally interested in the interactions with our students across their own identities and our identities.

[00:18:38] Bonni: Math is, of course, a topic and I know that you've written a lot about this, but math is a topic that, yes, is a subject, but also is something that can

be so alienating to people. Alienating because our sense of identity and what we're good at and what we're not good at just slams right against it so much. Where do you think about your role as trying to help students change that part of their identity and what are some of the things that you've tried and wrestled with in that realm?

[00:19:09] José: What I often find is that when it comes to math teaching, there's a small difference culturally, but small and significant difference between if you teach English language arts and math. I think the general public fully understands that math is an important subject to teach. However, literacy is something that is ... so delicately that if you call somebody illiterate, that is offensive. It is a dis. It is a curse in so many ways. If you call somebody innumerate, it doesn't faze anybody. For some people who are good at math are like, "No, I don't know what you're talking about. I am good at math."

Then it just goes away or if they're not good at math, they're like, "My mom wasn't good at math, or I wasn't good at math so it's okay if my child's not that good at math. It's whatever. This is numbers or letters. Where are we going to use it anyway?" Which is weird, because no one ever says, "All you have to do is learn how to read this manual and that's it." No, actually people want you to be able to read complex texts and decipher meaning, but when it comes to math, people don't have the same level of conversation. It's very much like you can add, you can subtract just do the basics and you should be fine. No, let's keep the same energy with both topics, you want to make sure students are proficient.

In some level with math, doesn't have to go all the way to algebra too, but at the very least where they're competent and being able to manipulate numbers and making interpretations of them, that's all important for me. I think a part of it too is having someone who actually believes that students can actually do it and trying to have that person impress upon the idea that our students are more than capable of doing the work in front of them. That they are all mathematicians in their own way, and as long as they are complete, consistent and correct, then they should be fine.

They can do it from multiple angles, they can do it multiple ways. Doesn't have to be just one way. If it's a way that they understand and they can continually use it across, that they're going to be really good at math. That's the way that goes, but that's a conversation we as a collective mathematics community have not had.

[00:21:22] Bonni: There has been such conversation around mindset. Fixed mindset, growth mindset and that has just permeated the conversation, but what you just brought up hasn't come up enough. Will you just turn around and blame it back on the students again, "Oh, look, it's actually your fault, ultimately. You're not good with math, and it's your fault because you have a fixed mindset about your own math." There is emerging research that comes out about the connection between teachers' mindsets about their own students and how we can limit them or in some ways help them to heal that in their own selves, I just think it's so powerful.

I will post it in the show notes on one of the articles that I came across, and I've posted it in previous episodes too. Just in case anyone missed it, I think this is a really important part of the conversation we're just not having enough.

[00:22:08] José: It becomes like an extension of Ruby Payne's culture of poverty where you forget to put the onus on the adults and it becomes very much, "Oh, let me put the onus back on the kids," and there's just no way we can fix this because they just need to be able to just change things. It's like, no, we also very much have a responsibility towards that nurture, towards that care, towards speaking up about that culture. Systems don't run without the adults who keep running them, and if we are to change those systems, then we who act within the system have to find ways to change that system.

[00:22:44] Bonni: You mentioned at the beginning of our conversation about just the limitations for you of the two dimensional screens that you are attempting to connect with your students on. I ask this next question with that very much at the forefront of my mind, but I want to know what opportunities you're having or are you having about talking with your students about what's happening in our country right now.

[00:23:06] José: Because my students are middle schoolers, I'm honestly having a hard time having that conversation from their ... of their homes. It's almost like Bloom's Taxonomy, which by the way of course, appropriated from the Blackfoot Nation, so shout outs to them. Being able to just make it day by day, feels like a traumatic experience for so many of our kids. Then talking about what's happening outside makes it even harder unless you have an environment. When Trayvon Martin had been killed and many number of folks throughout my teacher career had been killed mercilessly, I was able to carve out time from my teaching schedule to assure that students had safe space to talk about it.

Even during the past 2016 election, that morning was horrid. I just spent the morning saying, "Hey, what do you all want to talk about?" and just leave it open. It's harder to do that now, because now they're at home, and now they've been at home, and that's just been a difficult thing because that's the trauma. They're ripped away from their friends, they're ripped away from their families. All they have is this digital screen that may offer some solids, but not really. I did put it out there for folks, but as far as actually biting, it's been difficult, so I do try my best to weave questions into my assignments about how they're doing, how they feel, that sort of thing. I think that's actually adding some benefit, but for me to actually have a formal discussion, [chuckles] it's been a struggle.

[00:24:50] Bonni: The librarian that I was mentioning at the very start of the interview that did the identity iceberg exercise, she did something the other day. Actually, it was a video that she did about being safe and being a safe person when you go into online spaces. It was just one of those moments where it was a little on the longer side, and we were getting toward lunch, and I decided just to talk to them about some of those questions. Then there was a one question Google form that she wanted them to fill out. That was exactly what you just said, José, it was like, "How are things going?"

As a parent, you just need to let your kids just show up how they're showing up, but so many times just find myself wanting to, "Should we censor this?" Anyway, it was like, "Things are going good, because I get to play a lot of *Minecraft*, but people are dying, so it's also bad." [laughs] I wouldn't have known that about my son that

he is actually aware that bad things are happening, but at the same time, you were describing this for your students, what's happening inside home versus outside. It seems so much more profound than maybe ever before, because there wasn't such a difference between those two things. There was like, "I'm in, but I'm out. I'm moving around the world," and all of a sudden it's, "I'm in, but I can see what's out there too."

[00:26:18] José: For sure. Of course not to mention too, because the number of cases have been so prolific within the Washington Heights, Inwood and Harlem communities. Any number of our students have been affected by COVID. I think about at least two or three students, I know who've had a relative pass away, their father, their uncle, so it's gotten really personal. When this first started it was like, "Oh, I know somebody may be six degrees away from me that was affected by this." Then as the days pass by, the degrees got getting smaller and smaller and it was like, "Oh, no, we actually know somebody who passed away."

This is interesting too, because social media plays such a big role in this. When I logged into social media like Facebook, the first 8 out of 10 posts were about somebody passing away and I just said, "Oh, my goodness," it was getting so real, and we can't hide. Even as we're physically distancing, I should say, we're not socially distanced, that's critical for all of that.

[00:27:16] Bonni: This is the time in the show where we each get to give our recommendations. I've recommended this podcast in general before. It's amazing, it's called *Scene On Radio* and the first word scene is like a scene in a theatrical production, not like a S-E-E-N. *Scene On Radio* is wonderful, but the first set of series was called *Seen*, this time as in look and seeing white, and it was a really, really good set of episodes. Then more recently, they're doing some episodes around history and race and this specific one, the episode is called *More Truth*.

How well do the news media serve us as citizens? And what role does the notion of objective or neutral journalism play in the failings of American democracy? I had heard many of these stories before about we claim something's objective, but that's just all a matter of perspective. Mostly, that's more punishing to differing views from

the majority, but hearing them all together and the beauty of the storytelling that they do, but also getting to hear from some of the journalists. One of the women had been fired from her job as a journalist for expressing her views on the Hobby Lobby case that had come up in the Supreme Court.

She did it as a person, just expressing how she felt about something on social media, but they have rules in that organization against that. Again, I had read this story before, but then to actually hear the voice of the woman was really, really powerful to me. I'm only just skimming the surface. I feel I need to go back and listen to it about 10 more times before I could even start to get some of the nuance and depth here, it's really, really good. I highly recommend it. I'm going to pass it over to you José now for your recommendations.

[00:29:04] José: Oh, goodness. I obviously would recommend my own book because I have to do that, though I was told I shouldn't be doing that, so not actually going to do that.

[00:29:11] Bonni: Good, absolutely.

[00:29:14] José: I also want to recommend that folks follow the EduColor Movement. That's educolor.org and that's also EduColorMVMT on Twitter and Instagram. The reason I'm only recommending those things right now is also because I have to recommend that people focus on the moment in time that we're in right now. I think it's so fascinating to watch how many educators, people who are considered colleagues, contemporaries, who don't want to speak to the moment and time that we're in. Where everything is still very much about, let me just share this resource that can be used any time or where you want to put five or six different hashtags in that, but none of them are actually related to what the current events are.

I think we need more educators who can speak to what's going on right now in our country. Who can actually help heal our country, who can educate our kids, this specifically pertains to my fellow black educators, my fellow educators of color. Being able to speak to experiences that are marginalized. That are often vulnerable

in these times and making sure that our curriculum and our pedagogy and our systems are actually reflective of these experiences. Some people like to say and that includes myself, it's a miracle that it's taken this long for people to actually uprising.

That we haven't seen an uprising like this since Ferguson. You would think more of that would happen because we still have children and kids on the borders. We still have children being harassed and harangued because the LGBTQIA plus. We still have an educational system that works as intended that continues to marginalize so many of our kids, and that we keep talking about gaps but then we never actually wants to seek to address those gaps because we-- there's a grand swath of very powerful people who, yes, they may believe in the quality, but they want some people to be more equal than others. [chuckles]

Yes, that is an animal farm recommendation interpolated for this moment in time. That's what I'm recommending is being able to heal and really love one another and show that love. Let the hate flow through, let the anger flow through because that's going to help change. By the end of the day, we do it because we have a real love for each other, and people should be so thankful that we want this American experiment to actually work.

[00:31:36] Bonni: José, it is such an honor to get to talk to you. I echo your recommendations for your book. That is one of the reasons I was so excited to get to have this conversation with you. You just pour yourself out of that book. I truly felt just a compelling story about what this has meant to you in your life to be a teacher, but also it challenged us as readers, and you give us hope as readers. What a joy it is to talk to you today.

[00:32:01] José: Thank you very kindly.

[00:32:02] Bonni: I'm so grateful for the conversation with José Luis Vilson. I wanted to say, if you enjoyed this conversation and would like to learn more, I encourage you to check out the digital pedagogy lab 2020, it has moved online and will take place July 26th through August 2nd. You can go to digitalpedagogylab.com in

order to find more information about his keynote, as well as the other keynotes and instructors.

[music]

Thanks so much to each of you for listening today. I'm more grateful than ever to be in community with you and conversations like the one I just got to have with José are just a reminder that we are all doing this in solidarity with one another. There is important work to be done, and we're more important to each other than ever in that work. It's an honor that you would listen to the podcast during a time when I know most of us are not commuting the way that we used to. Less time where we may have opportunities to listen to podcasts. I really do treasure that you would take this time out of your day to listen. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll see you next time on *Teaching in Higher Ed*.

[music].

[00:33:25] [END OF AUDIO]

The transcript of this episode has been made possible through a financial contribution by the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE). ACUE is on a mission to ensure student success through quality instruction. In partnership with institutions of higher education nationwide, ACUE supports and credentials faculty members in the use of evidence-based teaching practices that drive student engagement, retention, and learning.

Teaching in Higher Ed transcripts are created using a combination of an automated transcription service and human beings. This text likely will not represent the precise, word-for-word conversation that was had. The accuracy of the transcripts will vary. The authoritative record of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcasts is contained in the audio file.