Episode 158: Steven Camicia

# KL: Katie Linder

**SC:** Steven Camicia

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and fifty-eight.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL**: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today's episode. I'm joined by Dr. Steven Camicia, an associate professor of social studies education at Utah State University. His research focuses on curriculum and instruction in the areas of perspective consciousness and social justice as they relate to critical democratic education. The Turk critical modifies Democratic education in order to focus upon the attributes of power inclusion and recognition in Democratic education. He was awarded an American Educational Studies Association 2017 Critics Choice book award for his book entitled, *Critical Democratic Education and LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum: Opportunities and Constraints*. In his book Steven examines how the context in Utah and California might influence what can and cannot be said in classrooms about LGBTQ individuals and issues. His research has been published in scholarly journals such as *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *The Social Studies, Social Studies Research and Practice, International Journal of Social Studies Research, The Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education, The Journal of Public Deliberation,* and *The London Review of Education*. He's a former associate editor of *Theory and Research in Social Education* and his research interests stemmed from his experiences as a former elementary school teacher.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Steven.

**SC:** Thank you for inviting me.

**KL:** So I am really interested in chatting with you about your research on democratic education among various other topics that I know we're going to cover today. Can you start by first offering us a little bit of a definition when you talk about democratic education? What does that mean?

**SC:** It means many things to me since my field is social studies education. I focus on curriculum and instruction in K-12 classrooms, mainly and then sometimes pre-service teachers in that area about ways that we can help students understand how to work effectively and justly within democratic communities. So basically, giving them the tools and ways to think about how we can make our communities more democratic from early ages.

**KL:** So I'm curious if you can go into some of the characteristics of what that would look like for democratic communities.

**SC:** Yeah, so there's there's a few main ways to look at it. One of it would be the perspectives that are included within the classroom. So as much as possible, increasing those perspectives so that everybody and different perspectives are included when making decisions around anything from school rules to broader discussions of local or even global communities, and increasing the amount of perspective so that students can begin to talk about different ways of viewing issues and actions towards making communities better. And, you know, have a way to feel like they can facilitate discussions and communications and that kind of ethic within the classroom, and foster those understandings.

**KL:** Alright, so I always loved origin stories. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got started with this topic? Why it's so interesting to you to really delve into democratic education for your research.

**SC:** Yeah. I was a sixth grade teacher, and so elementary level, and I started getting really interested in doing class meetings with my classes to discuss topics that were going on in school and in our classroom community, but also the larger community. And at that point I had read Walter Parker, who became my mentor, and I read his books and I decided to leave the classroom to do research in this area, and that's that's kind of how I got my start.

**KL:** So I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your most recent book critical democratic education and LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. Tell us a little bit about that book and how it came to be.

**SC:** That book really started at a specific moment in my life. It was a few years ago, somewhere around 2014 when our university library had a panel discussion during banned book week. And one person brought up in the discussion that local libraries should be able to ban books on LGBTQ individuals because it’s the parents that should decide. And I remember standing up and saying “I don't really agree with that.” I mean, what parents have rights, but as a child growing up I should have had the right to see myself included in the school library. So I really started getting interested in how different communities were understanding inclusion within the area of LGBTQ individuals and topics.

**KL:** What was maybe most interesting or surprising thing as you were working on that book?

**SC:** I wasn't completely surprised but the magnitude of the differences between communities within states. So what I did was I compared California and Utah as far as how the standards and the education system was set up to discuss LGBTQ issues and the the ways that that might influence democratic education on what could and couldn't be said in classrooms. And I was, I guess I was surprised by the degree to which communities within States varied, so that it wasn't a utopia dystopia type of a situation between two states, but really that really that there's there's larger pockets of inclusion within states and then vice versa. There's more exclusionary communities where LGBTQ issues are not allowed in the curriculum.

**KL:** So I know, Steven, that you've been writing about democratic education for quite some time; this has been a topic that you've returned to again and again. How is your approach to writing about this changed over time? Have you gotten more granular with your approach? Have you looked at things in a broader way? What has that looked like, you know, when you're studying the same topic for many years?

**SC:** It well in the beginning I was doing content analysis of instructional materials that would be used in social studies classrooms. And I became interested in the range of perspectives that were included in the actual instructional materials. And what I did was I developed methods for understanding how to, how to see how different perspectives were being excluded from the curriculum. In particular I was really interested in looking at instructional materials around how to teach students to discuss immigration policy, and I found you know large areas of exclusion. And so that's kind of how the work started. And then as the work progressed, I started the getting more interested in policy around the kind of larger structure of how people make decisions about what's included and excluded from the curriculum. So I did case studies of sort of controversies over social studies education, and how people negotiated those controversies. And I think more my work started moving more towards a post-structuralist approach somewhere around 2010. So that the, although issues of power inequalities were always present because that because of the absence as I showed before I started to more explicitly examine how power influences what is and isn't said in those democratic settings in classrooms. And that's kind of how my works progressed.

**KL:** So for our listeners who may not be familiar with post-structuralism. Can you give us a little bit of a definition of when you're coming from that approach? What does that mean to you?

**SC:** Yeah, so I within the post-structuralist approach the there's an idea that power and knowledge are linked, and that the way that we come to understand the world is really related to some of the the power relations within society. So, so a dominant group will decide what is included or excluded from the curriculum, and that's kind of a the the types of power inequalities that we look at. And it's very much grounded within language and text sometimes so that what students are given as far as perspectives or what perspectives are represented in classrooms is really important because it really starts developing a deep consciousness of how the world is set up so that oftentimes situations that are unjust can be justified, and within that situation students can leave our schools thinking that this is something that's normal when it's not. So those the when by looking at some of those inequalities, we can better understand how to create a curriculum that examines those types of arrangements that caused that foster and cause inequalities within society at large, as well as in the classrooms.

**KL:** So Steven you had mentioned kind of this idea of case studies, and when I hear you talking about your work, all I can think about is like news stories that are out all the time about, you know work that's being censored or you know, these kinds of concerns that are showing up in the classroom. To what degree it are those kinds of stories impacting where your area of interest is, you know, or are you just kind of taking those things in and setting them aside for future work, or you know, do you kind of have a pretty set agenda of what you're working on at this point? What is the kind of influence level of current media for you? News media?

**SC:** It's very influential. I feel When I look at this that work I see issues and I try to understand how students, say in an elementary classroom, will approach those or I understand them because as adults we might think that that's something that they're not engaging with but the media is all around them. And we either address it in our classrooms and help them look at differences and different perspectives productively or we kind of ignore it. So some of the cases, such as deliberating immigration policy. I've looked at cases of racial profiling, and then with the LGBTQ issues, they were all very much tied with certain products or issues at that were very timely.

**KL:** Alright, well, thank you Steven for giving us just a small window into your work. We're going to take a brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more from Steven about his work with diversity inclusion and social justice back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Steven as we heard a little bit about in segment one, a lot of your research has focused on topics related to diversity inclusion and social justice. I'm wondering if you can give us some other examples of what this work has looked like across your career in terms of the kinds of topics, you're studying or the kinds of research designs you're using.

**SC:** I'm I've covered a range of topics such as the ones that I just brought up. Some of them some of the more recent ones besides that my the one that I mentioned in my book had to do with incorporating post-colonial lenses within my work. So I developed a developed a collaboration with colleagues in the Philippines and we developed discussion boards between our pre-service teachers in in where I'm teaching, and then at a university in the Philippines, and they discussed issues, global issues. And with that we were able to show the ways that those kind of collaborations can occur while being very explicit about the history, and the power of symmetries or the inequitable power relations between the countries and see how that can influenced discussion, and help students learn about how they're situated globally as far as that goes so that it kind of extended the some of the other work that I did two more of a global scale.

**KL:** That's really fascinating. So I'm curious, because I think people always want to know how you go about setting up those collaborations? So where these other researchers or instructors that you knew that you already had established relationships with what made you choose, you know that region of the world to engage in this collaboration?

**SC:** At that time, our university was formed, well we still are forming, collaborations with different universities and different countries where we could have teachers from from there come to our university and then we would go to their university pre-service teachers as part of their student teaching at that that time I was just going there to plan that program and while I was there I met my colleague one of my colleagues there and we decided to start working on the project together. And so that's kind of how that that work began.

**KL:** It sounds like that has been kind of a very cool opportunity or benefit of doing this kind of work is that you get to do some of these cross-cultural collaborations. Steven, are there other kinds of opportunities are benefits that you found of conducting research and you know writing about issues of diversity inclusion social justice in your work?

**SC:** Yeah, I feel that it's it all has to do with building community and alliances. And I believe that my work and the work of my colleagues or around the globe really helps develop those alliances in the face of some pretty horrible conditions that we can work together as one to start addressing issues whether it's high stakes accountability, or racism in schools or you know different issues that we address that we form those collaborations and that gives us the opportunity to to build a base of knowledge where people can start making sense of those situations.

**KL:** Who are the primary audiences for your work, Steven? Who are you hoping will really engage with it?

**SC:** Mainly the audience for my work or social studies educational researchers and teachers. So it would be people that are social studies teachers in K-12 and then also researchers that look at democratic education and social studies education.

**KL:** Do you feel because of that audience that there is kind of a need for a practical component of your work as well as their kind of an applied component that those teachers, you know, you're hoping they're going to take something into the classroom and actually make a change or implement something?

**SC:** Yeah, my main focus has been to help teachers understand what perspectives are missing in curriculum, and how to bring those perspectives into the curriculum. So in one of the first parts of knowing that something's missing is having the tools to understand how we can identify what's missing and then consciously add that to the curriculum, or what students are learning in classrooms. So that's kind of the practical aspect of it as I see it.

**KL:** I'm wondering if you can share what an example would be of a tool that would help you know something was missing or their techniques or strategies that people can use?

**SC:** Yeah, so there's a few. It kind of depends on how you approach it. But one of them is just consciously listing the different perspectives that we find in the history curriculum or on a current events type of a curriculum, and then trying to understand what what pieces are missing. And often times that requires listening to students, and sometimes that means going into the literature to find other descriptions of what what things are missing. When with I when I did the deliberating immigration policy, the instructional material content analysis. I presented a grid that people could identify global and multicultural perspectives within the curriculum, and then just literally kind of identify the way the curriculum was looking at an issue and see what perspectives were missing.

**KL:** Okay, that sounds so useful. Okay, so I'm wondering I would imagine that researching in this area has its challenges, and that you're going to run into maybe topics that are a little more sensitive or, you know, like you said different audiences are coming with different mindsets around, you know, what this curriculum should be. Can you talk a little bit about some of the challenges of conducting research and writing in this area about issues of diversity inclusion and social justice?

**SC:** The yeah, the one of the barriers that I just discovered early on was that sometimes people are somewhat averse to controversy. And if you're trying to encourage the discussion of controversial issues within classrooms so that students can understand how to productively talk about those issues, sometimes people are can be apprehensive about that. So it just requires giving the rationales for doing such a such a instructional strategy or activity in the classroom.

The other one has to do with some of the topics. So for example, the LGBTQ topics are in Utah during the time that this the book was written. It was really pretty much forced from the schools and people would be very apprehensive about even talking about it. So those kinds of barriers and can be difficult to overcome a times.

**KL:** What's next for your research in this area?

**SC:** Right now I'm working on creating some, well I'm working on a book with my co-author, Ryan Knowles, and we're developing a book that’s aimed towards teachers mainly to start looking at critical media studies and how that could be incorporated in classrooms to make them more democratic and helping students understand current events in that range of perspectives that I was talking about. And then there's some work coming out with states social studies standards where we examined every state's social studies standards and look for the degree of inclusion of LGBTQ issues within those standards, so that's something that's coming out to and those are the main main things that I'm working on now.

**KL:** That sounds like such important work. All right, we're going to take another brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more from Steven. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Steven, I'd love to do a deeper dive into your most recent research project that you're working on and I know it's kind of connected for you to our current political climate. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**SC:** Yeah, I've been very disturbed by the recent rise of authoritarianism and what's been labeled as “post truth politics” that when people are giving reasons in the public sphere they’re reasoning is very much tied to some of the very inequalities that I've addressed in my work up to this point. Some of the more racist and xenophobic discourses that run through the reasons that people give in public and public issues. So the work that I'm doing now, I'm very much interested in how social studies teachers in K-12 classrooms, and even teachers that are learning how to be teachers, can help their students start understanding these discourses in order to discuss current events and issues in a productive way. And also look using history and geography and all of the tools that we have in social studies to understand history in a way that frames the current debate debates that we have within society. And I'm particularly disturbed by the polarization that's happened within our communities where we have, you know, a situation where our site society seems to be almost bifurcating, and seeing if it my work addresses ways that we might look at that and productively so that we can for more healthy democratic communities. And that's really the passion and the the direction of my work right now.

**KL:** So I would imagine Steven that you know, we brought up kind of some big words here like authoritarian and, you know, these other like discourse those kinds of things, that I would imagine some parts of K-12 you can't use that language to talk about this with the students. They're not going to quite understand what that means. Can you talk about some of the tools or strategies or angles that you're taking especially with younger students to have some of these conversations and dialogues? I can imagine high school students who might be able to go there and they might kind of get it, but with the younger students, how do you start the process of you know, shifting them toward these more healthy democratic communities if they may not fully understand, you know, some of the higher theoretical components of what you're talking about here.

**SC:** Yeah, so what we do is we focus very much on an inquiry-based curriculum where we'll ask questions such as, and this comes from Vivian Paley, but it's a I think it's a good example. We might ask pre-K students how if they think the rule you can't play are you can't say you can't play is fair. So we start discussing social arrangements and how that and and then along with that have them start getting reasons and form opinions about what they believe from very young ages, and contrast that with more of an authoritarian curriculum where they're told what to believe. And have them, at very young ages, and negotiating different perspectives and forming opinions that are provided or help being developed in that kind of learning environment.

**KL:** So I would imagine that with some of this curriculum you might have some parents pushing back and saying, you know, “this is not appropriate to talk about in school,” and I would imagine especially with older children who can tell their parents what they're discussing and the topics that are coming up. How do you respond to that in terms of, you know, really trying to create this environment where there is open dialogue, but parents may not feel completely comfortable with that?

**SC:** The best way to look at communication with parents, and maybe some of the apprehension surrounding what you brought up, is to be very explicit first of all about what you're doing in the classroom, and opening keeping that open communication. And then also understanding the rationales for democracy as a teacher, and finding ways to communicate that. Whether you're framing it in the term in terms of social justice or fairness, or the benefits to a community when there is more than one perspective provided that as educators were very clear about the benefits of such an arrangement.

**KL:** So I'm wondering if we have people who are listening who are wanting to maybe think about their own engagement with democratic communities and becoming better in those communities. Are there any resources that you think would be interesting books articles news sources that could kind of get people thinking about that in their own lives.

**SC:** Yeah, I want the book that I that I really look to now is by Iris Marion Young called *Inclusion and Democracy*, and I think I find that to be a really helpful way to start looking at how how we can frame or participate in communities, and then also understand what's going on on different levels. So, on one level, she talks about the ethics of being in a democratic community that that there's kind of an ethical bond that we have towards each other and we acknowledge that. And then looking at the ways that we can contribute to discussions or helping our communities that also recognizes that we might not all approach issues from the same perspective. And looking at ways to to understand that and then also ways that we might ask people to share their stories and their perspectives on a deeper level so that it's not just kind of this list of reasons, but it's something it's tied to something that's a lot more personal than that. And so I find that to be a really helpful book and I would hope other people do.

**KL:** Okay, we will link to that in the show notes for people to check it out. Steven, it just seems like communication is such an important piece of your work. Communication, you know in the classroom, between teachers and parents between parents and their children. How has this work impacted your own sense of communication and what it looks like in your own life?

**SC:** I I really value people's narratives, I find. I find stories very powerful and I really value asking people and having them share them as a way to create a deeper understanding of how we're all in this space together, and how we're discussing things. Different way the different things that might interrupt that communication or a lot of times in my work. I talk about distorting that communication the different things. So that's how that I've tried to look at things and then also being reflective about that communication afterwards.

**KL:** Well Stephen, this has been such a pleasure to talk with you today. Thank you so much for taking time to come on the show and share a little bit about your work with Democratic education.

**SC:** Thank you.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this episode of “Research in Action.” I'm Katie Linder and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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