



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of Reach. Teach. Talk.. This episode is being filmed during a period of unbelievable tumult in the world today. We have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic over three months now, and as you know from previous episodes of this podcast, teachers have been required to pivot and to switch from their brick and mortar, very relational classrooms to this unfamiliar, kind of foreign environment of teaching through a screen. Not to be crass, there's incredible things that teachers have been able to do using Zoom, using Microsoft Teams, using the platform of looking through a screen and building community. But at the same time, it's been an unbelievable challenge.

Nat:

And then on top of this, of course, is the very, very recent protests and other examples of police brutality and racism in the US. Certainly, these protests have not gone unnoticed by anybody, really, in the world, and for good reason. This is all growth, this is all tumult that is... If you inject some hope, this is going to bring us to a much more civil society and a much more egalitarian mentality. My personal belief is we are entering into a spiritual kind of realm, where we are going to be enlightened, and we're going to follow our better angels and we're going to come out of this discomfort with a tighter and more cohesive world.

Nat:

I lead with this, because the timing... There's serendipity in life, and there are paths that we take and are choices we make and there are opportunities that come in, full focus and sometimes not full focus, that we really... when we look back, we were grateful that we paid attention to. Today's guest is an example of that, because Erahm Christopher directed, wrote. I'll let him give his whole background about this movie that he created called Listen, which absolutely took education and schools by storm very, very recently, a few years ago.

Nat:

I had the privilege and opportunity to meet Erahm recently and to become familiar with his work and with this movie, Listen. The reason why I'm talking about serendipity is because if I take a step back and I just Listen to the path that kind of came about in the past month or two, which brought me from the west coast and east coast and brought me to meet Erahm, it leads me to think about the importance of reflection and the importance that reflection in time to reflect brings to life. Erahm's movie, Listen really had a central theme about the importance of listening, actively listening. This is a two part series about the importance of listening.

Nat:

Dr. Graham Bodie from University of Mississippi was my first guest to talk about listening versus hearing, the importance of taking a step and really actively listening to people, to others. We're going to take it to the next level. Part two of this series in this podcast with Erahm is, his movie is all about the importance of listening and reflecting and having the time to kind of break in and crash into the world of

somebody else, and other people who may come from different lives, different lifestyles, different backgrounds, and all of that, but to step in, to lean forward, to lean in, we've heard that before, particularly in an educational setting.

Nat:

I could talk to Erahm for hours about his movie and about where we go as a society and how his movie is pertinent to today's events, yet we're going to have to keep this to our 25 minute podcast length, and to really focus this conversation on where schools are right now. Erahm not only made this movie focused on a high school that serves the heart of this community, a fictionalized community, but one that I think many of us can relate to, and yet there are this idea of a high school, of a school being a microcosm afraid of society.

Nat:

Where we are right now with our focus in high schools about listening our focus on taking the time to pay attention and to reflect and to not fill the room with our own words, but to instead treat the room as an atmosphere to learn. Listening and learning are connected. Anyhow. I'm super glad to have Erahm Christopher here today to kind of... I would love to just start off, Erahm, with... Well, first of all, a huge welcome to you. And [crosstalk 00:04:46]. I'm thrilled to have you. And second of all, just basically, where did the origin of Listen come from? What can you share with listeners and viewers of Reach. Teach. Talk. who haven't seen your movie yet? What can you say about the origin of this movie, what its theme is, its plot and what motivated you to create this incredible film?

Erahm:

Wow, it can be a very long winded answer, so I'll try to keep it short and sweet. My work is always guided by my experience, and Listen was born out of over a decade of interacting with youth, adults, educators, administrators, counselors on over 1,200 school campuses across the United States, Canada, and even Europe. Basically, my work and segue into film began out of a response to a very unsettling national tragedy, The Columbine High School Shooting. When that tragedy happened, it really... Like everybody, I was trying to figure out why. One of the reactions had was to go talk to the students, because I felt nobody was really asking them that question. So what I did is I went out and gave five diverse students each video cameras and let them film a year in their life, and what came out of that was over 80 hours of very raw, real footage.

Erahm:

Because I gave five diverse teenagers each video cameras, all socially, ethnically, economically, and demographically diverse, and what happened was they came back with over 80 hours of raw footage. Flash forward, I turned that into a four-part film series about various issues youth were going through, and I ended up taking that on the road and started presenting these films and speaking in schools all over the country. Over that time, the one thing I noticed is that everywhere I went, youth were always telling me, "No one really listens to me." Whether that was in Rome, Italy, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Montreal.

Erahm:

I also noticed that I had the definition of the word listen all wrong, because what I always thought they were saying was, no one hears me, because that's naturally the definition that we kind of connect listen to. Individually, I was thinking, "Well, what we do is we just elevate their voices. They need to be heard, so let's get them to speak up." But I realized after 10 years that what I was doing was not really addressing the bigger issue. I was hyper focusing on different social issues students were going through from bullying, body image self-esteem, substance abuse, and I realized that there was a bigger

overarching issue, which was mental health. I also realized that this definition of the word listen I had all wrong in the sense that what they weren't saying is no one hears me, they were saying, no one pays attention to me.

Erahm:

I think that that is what gave me the motivation to research this concept of listening, and what I found, that the word listen is rooted in a Germanic word, [foreign language 00:07:59], which simply means pay attention to. So that became the beginning of the film. It was really inspired by all of the interactions with the people that I've met over 10 years of being on the road. What I wanted to create was a film that would essentially address all of the issues that I felt that youth were constantly bringing to my attention in a way that would provoke an audience to have a conversation, and essentially, so others would start to pay attention. So I looked at the project as an educational tool, even though it was hidden in the guise of a Hollywood movie. But my end goal was to create a film that provoked conversation and listening.

Nat:

What's ironic is what you just said right there, your goal was to create a film that provoked conversation and listening in listening. It provoked listening. Because what you're saying is the outcome. What you're hoping from the viewers is to understand the difference between, as you learned, hearing and listening and this idea that, you've got students in these high schools who are being heard. You can't help but hear them, right? You walk down those halls of high schools that you go and visit and you give presentations and workshops to, they're pretty loud places when they're just between classes, passing period and whatnot, or when they're gathering in the gym or the auditorium and the gymnasium and they're settling in. That's a thunderous noise.

Nat:

At the same time, the silence that falls on these students when you're running your workshops, after they've seen this film, is palpable as well, it's a heavy, loud silence. I'd like to explore that a little more, if you're comfortable with this, Erahm, is this idea of kind of, what's behind this starvation, this... really the scarcity of listening in school environments, based on what you've observed in all the schools that you visited.

Erahm:

Well, I think what happens in schools is what happens in life. We get so consumed by the processes, the management and the administration that we often don't feel like we have the time to truly take a moment, which ironically was the tag for the film. It only takes a moment to truly pay attention, but I feel like we feel so compelled by this energy that's driving us to teach a certain subject, to make sure our students are performing a certain way, achieving the grades. We have so many markers in life that basically adjudicate what our performances or our productivity is, and it really consumes us. I see that often in a high school campus.

Erahm:

I'm not saying every school is this way, but the ones that I find have the most challenges are the ones that truly don't take the time to focus on the importance of paying attention, listening, understanding that, what is really going on with your student body? What is going on with your educators? What is going on with your administrators, or your janitors? All of the individuals on the campus, essentially the stakeholders, are basically contributing to the energy of that campus. And if you're not paying attention to truly what is going on in the lives of those organisms that inhabit that ecosystem, you are going to create a culture that could be detrimental to the success and productivity of that school. So I think

paying attention and taking a moment to do so is paramount and it should be the main focus on that campus before you even get to the teaching.

Nat:

You seem to refer to schools as communities in themselves that possess their own culture. What I'm drawing from what you're saying is that a school ultimately does, optimally does is create a culture where students feel safe to be themselves, safe to learn, safe to take chances. There is a character in Listen, who... There's a scene in this one... the only scene this character is in is a scene that takes place in the evening, where the lead character, the new guidance counselor is having a parent night, and nobody shows up except for the janitor, who comes in and he starts cleaning up the classroom that was set up for this parent night, where nobody showed up. It was a moment, Erahm, that I really would love to explore a little bit with you, because it relates to what you were just saying about how every member, every, as you said, stakeholder in a school community matters. What's the role of this janitor? What made you decide to put this scene in?

Erahm:

Oh, that's a great question. The janitor was one of my favorite characters, and as you said, he only shows up once. But to me, he's integral. Again, what I'm trying to do is test the audience to see, are you truly paying attention? Because the janitor on a school campus is probably the person that observes the most. They're cleaning up all of the mess of every single person that inhabits that community. They know more about what's going on with the students, the educators and the administrators, than any of those individuals could probably imagine.

Erahm:

That character was actually inspired by a maintenance worker that I met in a school in Northern California. He actually witnessed one of the programs that I was doing at the time, and he came up to me and he said, "You know what, don't stop doing what you're doing." And I thought, I thought, "Wow, out of all the individuals on that campus that come up to me afterwards and take the time to say that to me..." And I say, "Wow, thank you very much." And he says, "I see so much on this campus, and this school needs this type of conversation. It needs to start paying attention to how they're treating each other. It pains me to watch the interactions between the students and the educators, and so much tension being created."

Erahm:

Here was this person, whose job is merely to maintain this community, clean up, and probably nobody on this campus understands that how accurate his observation is and how much insight he has to offer. So that particular scene... The counselor engages him in a conversation, and that scene was supposed to be a little bit longer, but then I felt it was too much the length of the film. But the counselor says, "Do you have children?" And he says, "Yes, many." And the counselors like, "How many?" He's like, "1,200." And the counselor was like, "What?" And everybody laughs. And the counselor says, "Oh, students?" And he says, "Yeah, students."

Erahm:

The funny thing is, is that when I'm in a screening with students and educators or parents, and they see that scene, they all laugh. They laugh because of the way the janitor's quirkiness is, but I also think it's a moment where they... It's a truth laugh in the sense like, "Oh, that's right. I never thought of that that way before."

Nat:

What I'm thinking now is, it's ironic too, I hadn't thought about this until now, that the guidance counselor has nobody coming into his office every day, and his number one job is supposed to be the ears and the connector of students to teachers and students to the school, yet nobody's coming into his office. But the janitor has access that this guidance counselor doesn't have, surely because he's in this role. What student is going to come in and be like, "Hey, let me just hang out and talk to you about my life." But the janitor's around, and he's able to be rather invisible, but also very absorbent of everything. Right?

Erahm:

Exactly. And on that note, if you want to go even deeper, you think about the very first interaction the counselor has with the administrator and what the administrator does. He basically tells him, "This is how we communicate, you answer when called." And he gives them the walkie talkie. The counselor actually has a question, and the administrator doesn't pay attention, he leaves him. The counselor was just looking for guidance. So this janitor actually gives him some very sage-like words. He gives them the guidance that no one has given him since coming on that campus. I go back to what I was saying about the sense of the community and paying attention to what we all need, and what's going on in our lives. The first day the counselor stepped on that campus, the administrator, the supposed sage, CEO, the leader didn't pay attention to what this counselor needed to do his job.

Nat:

Now, let's talk about administrators versus teachers here. And not versus, but just... They are two completely different roles, right? It's funny, because we look at schools... We tend to put a corporate lens when we look at school organizations and hierarchies, and we think that there is a hierarchy when really... It's funny, because if you really look at the power dynamic in a school, the teachers actually have the greatest power, because they're the ones who have the classroom, they're the ones who are daily interacting with their students, and they are able to go deep. Whether they're teaching math or biology or English or whatnot, that's the opportunity that teachers have and they know it.

Nat:

But the perceived power is with administrators. I'm speaking as a person who half my life was a teacher and half my life was an administrator, so I feel like it's fair for me to be able to say, the power is with the teachers, but it's the administrators that people outside of schools tend to think that, "Oh, okay, it's a natural progression from being a teacher to being an administrator. Like, you teach for a certain amount of time, then you build the skills, and you're able to then naturally become an administrator." When really, again, it's very separate jobs.

Nat:

Being a school administrator is much more... in my opinion, much more akin to being a middle manager in a corporation than it is to being a teacher, frankly. But the great administrators are able to transcend and be both. But I bring that up because there are some good lessons in Listen also about that, about teaching and administering. Because I think that the school principal is a fascinating character, the same guy who kind of talks to the walkie talkie at the guidance counselor on the first day, on his first day. I'd love for you to just explore a little more about his character. What were you looking at teaching the viewer, the audience about the role of an administrator versus the role of a teacher? And what makes a great one?

Erahm:

Well, for me, that dynamic between the administrator and the teachers or the counselor, I want it to be distinct that they were all on kind of different pathways, and they weren't intersecting. They were kind

of going about their dog or their duties with this mindset of, "This is what I have to do. I have to accomplish this, I have to accomplish this, it needs to be done on this amount of time or I'll have some kind of penalties or..." I feel like that's one of the problems that I have found, is when there's no intersection, when there's no communication, clear communication about, "This is what I'm working on, I need your help with this, this is how I'm feeling..."

Erahm:

I wanted it to be very clear from the beginning that that didn't exist in this school, and that's what created most of the problems. I want to go on kind of a side note for a minute. Making this very distinct stemmed from a conversation that I had from a security advisor, he worked for the secret service, I met him at a conference. And he started talking about what was some of the fundamental problems that led to 9/11. What he cited was the communication between the various entities, the intelligence communities. They all had their own information and were focused on doing what they did best, but they were not communicating together about what information they found and how they could help each other and how they could think about the information that they all collectively had and how it could help them make better decisions moving forward.

Erahm:

Now he ended up becoming a security advisor for schools, and he basically said to me that the one thing that's so paramount in schools is communication. It's like, if we're going to be in a community that's functioning together, we need to work together. So I wanted to make it clear from the start that that administrator was so caught up in what he had to do, that he was not listening to what anybody else in that campus needed to help do their job.

Nat:

That is so brilliantly stated, and it makes me think about my use of the word power, because power... If we are looking through the lens of what you just shared, power is ego, power is an extension of one's ego. And if you're egoic, and if you're going to let that kind of drive you in your career, in your field, then you're going to not be interacting and listening and collaborating with others as well. So I wonder, now that you're really getting me thinking, Erahm, about optimal school communities and how... It sounds like what you're suggesting is, the optimal school community is one where you take the power out, or at least you reduce the ego, and you collaborate through listening, through taking the time.

Nat:

I'm thinking about the stereotypical classroom as a silo, right? Like, there are so many moments in the day when I was teaching, where I would just wish I could have just shared with a colleague, an adult. "You wouldn't believe what happened in this class today. You wouldn't believe what this student said," that eureka moment. And, "I'm feeling so great." Or the opposite, right? "I don't know what I'm doing wrong here. I'm not breaking through this student." I want to be able to share that with the colleagues and not feel like I'd be judged and allow me to have these moments.

Nat:

I could talk for a while about this with you, but it gets me to think concretely about the fact that every single one of the main student characters in your movie has a background that is distinct, and that is absolutely informing how they come to school, how they learn, therefore, how they perceive themselves through others. Where they're coming from matters in this movie. I wonder if you can speak to this idea that... Part of your movie is about meeting students where they are and how important that is. Right?

Nat:

You've got Benny who comes from mixed generation, Latino family with kids and with this pull, this constant pull to show his masculine side by joining a gang, for example, by being tough and showing his masculinity. You've got Summer, who has a mom who's not totally connecting with her, right? She's always got a glass of Chardonnay in one hand and she's giving her good advice and she's trying, but she's solo and she's not able to really know her daughter. Or you've got Josh, who's the... Or is it Tosh or Shawn? I can't remember his name. It just escapes me, but the lead character.

Erahm:

Josh.

Nat:

Yeah, Josh, who's father is so distant, both in mentality and what fatherhood is, again, tapping into the idea of masculinity and culture today. But they're all coming to school. Every kid is coming to school, but carrying the background of the home or the background that they're coming from, and this idea of meeting students where they are, this idea of taking the time. So how do you look at the tool, I guess, of listening, the skill of listening as an asset toward building the teacher-student connection?

Erahm:

Well, you make me think of an interaction I had with 30 principals in Florida, where I did an action plan meeting to identify what they felt were the top three critical issues that they all shared, even though they were all basically administrators on 30 different campuses, all from different social economic backgrounds. What they came up with collectively, voted in importance, was... number one issue was loneliness and lack of connection. The number two issue was mental health, the number three issue was safety and security. But then they forced me to put another one on the board. They said, "We need to add another one." I said, "What is it?" And it says, "What the kids come to school with that we can't control."

Erahm:

And I said, "Okay, well, we're going to put that up there, but what I want to do a little bit differently instead of putting that at number four, let's put that over number one. So let's make that number one." And I said, "I want you to look at these and tell me what you see as the relationship." It was very hard for them to understand the connection between the four, but what I wanted to identify is drawing the arrow. I drew an arrow down and said, "Well, if a student comes on campus with all these baggage, just like those characters in the movie, this fact that there is no connection with their mother, the fact that their father is a racist and they're struggling with how they feel and how their father wants them to think and feel, they come to this and they have that sense of aloneness.

Erahm:

Because they feel like they don't have someone in their safe space, which is essentially supposed to be the home, so they come to school feeling alone in how they're feeling, because they don't know if every other student has a father that treats them this way, or a mother that's disconnected, or they don't have a father in their life. When they're feeling this aloneness and their lack of connection, well, it's been proven that then we have mental health issues. When you have students with mental health issues, then you have safety and security risks on campus."

Erahm:

So I go back to the beginning of all of these characters. It's interesting, because the environment that you create for true active listening begins with creating a safe environment, and creating that environment in the school needs to be paramount. Those characters that came onto the campus in my film, I wanted the audience to take a direct bird's eye view of what's going on in their life before they get on that campus, so you understand a little bit better about why they're acting the way they are on that campus. What's interesting is if I never showed you that family life and all I focused on was the campus life, then you'd probably have a different perception of that particular student, just like the educators, just like the administrators and just like the other students have the perception of the students that they inhabit on their campus.

Erahm:

So going back to your question, I guess what I want people to start being aware of, listening to, is what you don't see, think, or hear or feel, what people carry with them before they step on to that community. What's been amazing with the way people have watched the movie and what I've observed is that I tell principals on campus, I say... when they're about to watch the film, I say, "The hour 48 minutes that I know it pains you to take away from class time is going to be an incredible field trip for your students, and they're going to learn more about each other and themselves without anybody ever opening their mouth. Because they're going to start to see and hear and think and feel a little bit differently about the person sitting next to them as they're watching this movie."

Nat:

Erahm, how can teachers and listeners and viewers of this podcast access Listen?

Erahm:

So, if you're going to watch it on a personal basis, and I say personal because we've had some issues in the past, you can go to [buylistentoday.com](http://buylistentoday.com). So B-U-Y Listen, L-I-S-T-E-N today, T-O-D-A-Y.com. If you would like to use it in an educational setting, then you need to email [info@listenthemovie.com](mailto:info@listenthemovie.com) to obtain a proper license. I say that clearly because we've had issues, where some people want to take the film and show it to 30, 40, or 100 people, and it poses a lot of challenges and problems. So to get an educational license, do use the email. If you want to watch it just for yourself in the comfort of your home, go to [buylistentoday.com](http://buylistentoday.com).

Erahm:

There's also a 230 page SEL focused curriculum to use with the film. So we have teachers that use the film in their classroom, we have teachers colleges that are teaching teachers, and they've created whole courses around the film, and you're using the curriculum actively. We've had the film being used for professional development days, I've come in and done trainings and facilitated discussions. So it's exactly why we... The way we designed the film so it can be used in that way, and at the end of the day, also, just to be viewed as a movie that you can enjoy.

Nat:

Absolutely. Really, this movie absolutely blew me away as a 23 year old teacher, an administrator and somebody who has always been focused on the social, emotional learning of our students and the fact that now is science backing up the fact that learning is cognitive and emotional and social. And if you're cutting off the social part, if it's a lonely existence for these teenagers coming to school every day, then they're not going to learn. They're not going to learn nearly to the depth and to the ability that they deserve to. This whole idea of the school is a microcosm for society at large... Just every school, I can't stress enough, every school should screen this movie. I truly believe it is such a positive force.



Nat:

Teachers have responded brilliantly to it, administrators have teared up. You've shared stories with me offline about just the impact of this film. My last question for you, Erahm, is what are you up to now? Are you still facilitating any workshops, or is this something where now you're moving on to a different project or what?

Erahm:

So right now, Listen... I am still doing a lot of work with Listen. I'm working with districts to basically launch comprehensive mental health initiatives. So I'm still working actively with districts. I've also partnered up with organizations that are focused on ACEs, adverse childhood experiences, I want to help get this film integrated in the work that they're doing. Essentially, my goal would be to have this film available for schools across the country to be used as an educational tool. So I'm still pushing on that side. I do a lot of trainings, facilitate discussions and do a lot of keynote talks at conferences focused on education and social work.

Erahm:

But then I'm right now starting to put together a new documentary that I'm very, very excited about, and it's focused on what's going on now with regards to the COVID crisis and also what happened with George Floyd. This really focuses on pain. I feel like once we start to pay attention and if you watch the movie, you're going to find that everybody in that film is going through pain. You can't live a life without experiencing pain, as much as we try. So that's where I'm going.

Erahm:

I'm also writing. I actually am working on putting together another screenplay, which is... starting to write, that's also focused on the subject. My emo, it's really to immerse myself in the subject in kind of a documentary-esque way so I can get close to the individuals that have shared those experiences and help educate me, and then go write a script about it to hopefully create another educational tool that can further our shifted perspective and ultimately our shift in behavior.

Nat:

Well, that is fantastic, and Listen as a huge step towards shifting school cultures toward what's really important, and the idea that we are a collection in schools, we are a collection of individuals that are coming together in community, and that the optimal schools are the schools where the focus on listening, the focus on taking the time to connect, the time to build relationships... This whole podcast is about relationships. Reach. Teach. Talk. is talking about how we can strengthen relationships in the classroom, but also, we call it the classroom of life, and how important that is. Again, getting back to what I said at the beginning here in the intro, this is serendipitous, Erahm. The fact that at this period of time...

Nat:

I know that when your movie came out, it was probably serendipitous back then as well. But right now, I can't think of a better time to show, screen this movie to communities and the schools, because the overall message is, stop for a moment, everyone just stop, pause, lean forward, and just Listen to the person across from you. Listen and learn. It sounds very kindergarten when I say it, but it is so profoundly deep. If we can do this, we will come out a better society. So Erahm, thank you for taking your role in making for a better society for all of us.

Erahm:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Nat, for allowing me to be on your podcast and also for taking the time to view my film.

Nat:

I'm thrilled. I'm just so blessed, so thank you very, very much.

Erahm:

Thank you.