



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 6, Episode 1

John Spencer | Student Engagement

Audio Transcript

John Spencer:

Hi, I'm John. This is the Think Inclusive Podcast.

Tim Villegas:

Recording from my office in beautiful Marietta, Georgia, you are listening to the Think Inclusive Podcast, episode 16. Today, we have John Spencer, speaker and author of *Empower* and *Launch*, entertaining and practical books that help us to rethink how we deliver content and engage students in the learning process. We talk about what it looks like to help students own their learning, including students with disabilities.

Tim Villegas:

After the podcast, please stop by our Patreon page, where you can support our goal to bring you in-depth interviews with inclusive education and community advocacy thought leaders. In order to cover our hosting, transcription, and production costs, we need to meet our goal of \$100 per month. Please help us keep this vital resource available to everyone by pledging your support of \$1, \$5, \$10, or \$20 per month. When you pledge as little as \$1 per month, you get access to our patron-only feed for blog posts, special edition podcasts, and picture updates along the way.

Tim Villegas:

I'd also like to thank our sponsor, Physical Attraction, the podcast that tries to explain physics one pickup line at a time. From the laws of nature to the end of the world, you can find the show on Apple podcasts, or wherever you listen to podcasts, and on Twitter @PhysicsPod. So, without further ado, here is the interview.

Tim Villegas:

I'd like to welcome John Spencer to the Think Inclusive Podcast. John is a professor and author in Oregon. He is the author of *Empower* and *Launch*, which is part of what we're going to talk about today, and also he is passionate about seeing every child embrace a maker mindset. Thank you for being on the Think Inclusive Podcast.

John Spencer:

Thanks for having me.

Tim Villegas:

Fantastic. Okay, so number one, I don't know a whole lot about you other than I think we have mutual friends from way back when, and you lived in Arizona, which is what we talked about before we started recording. So how long have you been an educator?

John Spencer:

So I started, gosh, this would have been like maybe 14 years ago, I started teaching middle school. I had worked for an inner city faith-based nonprofit, and from there I decided, "You know, I really want to be a teacher in the same community," and so I taught middle school for 12 years, and then now for the last two years I have been teaching at the university level.

Tim Villegas:

Fantastic. So your middle school experience ... Then that's interesting that you stayed with middle school. I guess, what drew you to middle school aged students?

John Spencer:

I think for me there were a lot of things about middle school that were significant. I think I had my best teacher was in the eighth grade. She was a teacher who for the first time ever I got to truly own learning in her class, and I did a year-long project. It was this really cool history day project, and I think it had a huge impact on my life. I think that particular year was interesting for other reasons, difficult for other reasons. That year I had a friend in the eighth grade who committed suicide, and so it was a really emotional year as well, and so I think when I majored in education, I really thought I would be in high school, and then I did student teaching in the middle school and thought, "You know what? This is where I belong. This is what I love doing." I just kind of ended up in there. I really thought I would be a high school teacher, but from the first day I started student teaching in middle school I kind of realized this is my place.

Tim Villegas:

So after working so many years in middle school, I guess, what helped you make the transition to teaching at the university level?

John Spencer:

You know, I think for me the ease of the transition was that I had done a lot of professional development for teachers. I've done conferences and keynotes and things like that, workshops, a lot of professional development at my district, so I was really comfortable working with current teachers, new teachers, preservice teachers, that kind of stuff, so it was kind of an easy transition there, and I think I was just ready for something different. I had loved teaching middle school, but I was ready to ... I just started to, I guess, develop a passion for helping preservice teachers become teachers and reach their potential.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah, absolutely. So let's talk a little bit about your book. So Launch, which was written a couple years ago? Is that right? Or is it more recent than that?

John Spencer:

Let's see. About a year and a half ago, yeah.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. Okay, and could you tell me, because that's, I read Empower but I did not read Launch, so maybe you could tell me and our listeners what Launch is about.

John Spencer:

Yeah. So Launch is basically about the design thinking process, and there's a lot of different frameworks out there, but A.J. Juliani and I had developed kind of a K-12 one, and so the gist of it is there's, it's an acronym, and I know people hate acronyms, but it's an acronym. So it stands for LAUNCH, the L stands for look, listen, and learn, and that's kind of where you start with awareness. It could be awareness of a problem. It could be awareness of a social issue. It could be empathy that you have toward an audience, and then from there you kind of move into inquiry, and that's the A, and that's ask tons of questions. Then the U is understand the process or problem, and that's when kids are engaged in some kind of research, and it could be interviews, needs assessments. It could be online research. It could be books, whatever, and then they begin to ideate and plan and kind of brainstorm, and that's the navigate ideas, so that's the N of the LAUNCH.

John Spencer:

And then a big portion of it is C, which is create a prototype. So they're creating something that they're going to actively iterate and improve and change, and that's the next piece, H, which is where they highlight what's working and fix what's failing. And then when that's finished, they launch it to an audience, and that last piece is really significant. I think it's important that students share their work with an authentic audience.

Tim Villegas:

So I'm assuming that this is something that you developed while you were in middle school and teaching middle school students, and-

John Spencer:

Yes.

Tim Villegas:

And so I want to kind of bring it, that idea of the design process, and then also when we talk about Empower, about students and your ... the design thinking can be applicable for all students, including students with special needs or students with disabilities, however you want to say it, and I wanted to see if you could talk a little bit about how you can still do this type of design thinking with students with disabilities.

John Spencer:

Yeah, absolutely. So first of all, it really is like any subject. I taught self-contained so I taught all subjects, and it fits every subject, and it fits every type of learner, and you will have to provide supports still and that piece is important. When I taught self-contained, I had the students who were yellow and I had students who were gifted, and then I had a good portion in the class who were classified as special ed, and so basically nobody in my class didn't have some kind of a label attached to it, right? And they all needed different types of support. So it is important that accommodations are still happening and things like that, but what I'll say is I definitely think it works with students who qualify as special ed or, like you said, whatever terminology you want to use, special needs. There's a lot of great examples of that.

John Spencer:

So I had students who were labeled as nonverbal autistic, and they thrived in the design process. When we did things like the design a roller coaster project or building a city, these were some moments where they really, really shined. It was powerful to see them share their work with the world.

John Spencer:

I give the example of we used the design process for student blogging, and I had a student who didn't really say anything at all who really struggled with certain areas of articulation, but by going through this process and having the time to iterate and improve and revise, it was really cool to watch him develop this video game blog, and it was so cool to watch kind of the power of the LAUNCH where he was sharing his work with the world.

John Spencer:

In this case, he published it on a blogging platform, and I still remember the day where, you know, it was maybe the second week of school and he wasn't, I mean because he was nonverbal there weren't a lot of conversations and he kind of had in many ways been excluded as much as I was trying to create an inclusive community. It was early on in the year, and I was still trying to figure out how to make this work, and I still remember suddenly there's 10 comments on his blog and so many kids are into his blog, and I remember just the power of for him to have an audience was really cool. So I don't know if I answered your question. I just think the process can be applicable to all students I guess is what I would say.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah, and I think one of the things is that is you actually have to believe that all students can do this. I think one of the barriers is that when you think about projects-based learning or design thinking or, I don't know how to say all that stuff, but students who are nonverbal, who have limited speech, who have particular disabilities, they're just not even thought of in the process of like, that they would even get anything out of it. So number one, for an educator to be like, "Well, of course they're going to be included in this, and we are going to whatever they're able, however they are able to access the curriculum or access letting us know what they prefer or choose is the way that we can get them to buy into their own learning." So I think that's like number one really is actually believing that our students can do this no matter who they are or what label they have, so that's, I mean, I'm just excited to hear that that's something that was even on your mind.

John Spencer:

Well, and I want to point something out also. One of the valuable things, in the navigate ideas phase they have to engage in project management, and so there's a big metacognition piece and there's a big like project planning piece, and because of the need for accommodations, I had several students who had issues with executive function, and so the strategies of helping them through executive function in project planning turned out to be strategies that every student benefited from. And it's a little bit like this whole idea that universal access isn't just for people with a label. Universal access helps everyone. It's the same kind of idea. Every student benefited from the structured aspect of learning how to plan or learning how to break down tasks or ... Does that make sense?

Tim Villegas:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Why don't we talk a little bit about what that looks like? And I know that you talk about it in Empower about what it actually looks like in the classroom for this to happen, and I guess maybe the fear of that you're losing control of the classroom, that there's going to be too many people doing too many different things, that it's going to be too loud. There's all of these different, I guess,

perceived barriers to doing something like this, including like, "Well, you know, John, I've got a curriculum that I need to teach. I have standards that I need to teach. When am I going to have time to do this?" Maybe you can address some of those fears or concerns.

John Spencer:

Oh, definitely. So I think I'll just give the example of what am I going to do having so many kids doing so many different things at the same time, and I think that piece is significant in terms of you already have kids doing so many different things at the same time. Like if you're teaching one lesson and assuming that you're teaching it to all kids, there's a whole group of your classroom that's already off task doing something different. So like already that's already happening that some of them are not doing the same thing as others. They're already not working at the same pace. We know that in every lesson that we teach, and so the question is: What happens if they are doing something different that's productive? What happens if they're doing something that is actually connected to their learning? And it is tough. You do have to let go of a little bit of control as a teacher, but if there's high motivation, then you end up with higher engagement.

John Spencer:

I mean, I realize that it's not always going to work perfectly, but I think it's important to remember ahead of time that it's not working perfectly already. The status quo is not, in many cases, not working. But with that said, some of the big questions, the curriculum map question or the time question or even the assessment question that comes up all the time, I think those really come down to the idea that design thinking or empowering your students, either of those two ideas, they're not about adding something new to your plate. It's about a different way of organizing your plate, right? It's about structuring your classroom in a different way, and it is a little bit rocky at first. I can't promise it's going to work perfectly. I can't promise it's always going to be this utopia. But when the engagement goes up and students are empowered, when they own their learning, that kind of stuff happens, you do find that it works.

John Spencer:

I mean, in terms of how it actually works, I think there are some strategies that we know can help out. So if you take the curriculum map example, the curriculum map tells you everything you have to learn at a given time, right? So you have to teach this standard on this day, this standard on that day, but it doesn't tell you what you can't teach, and so if you have all students hitting one particular standard but you're empowering all of your students to hit other different types of standards, you're not breaking with the curriculum map. You're just teaching to all of your students.

John Spencer:

And sometimes you have to kind of use a language that principals use or the leaders. I always said if we did a design thinking process and it was in language arts, I'll give that as an example, I was making sure that the standard and objective on the board fit the curriculum map, and they were in my lesson plans. But we're also hitting several other standards that are significant, and if a principal asked me, "Why are you doing these standards?" I could say, "Well, we're just spiraling back to standards," or, "Those are review standards." If a principal said, "Why do you have 10 kids who are all learning different objectives right now?" I would say, "This is embedded intervention and enrichment," and those types of things were really helpful. I don't know if I answered your question. It's just such a big question-

Tim Villegas:

Oh, yeah.

John Spencer:
-I don't know if I-

Tim Villegas:
Yeah, it is a big question, and I don't think there is one particular answer as far as how you're going to do that, but I think the biggest thing is that you have to be creative. As the teacher, you have to be creative and say, "How am I going to make this work and be committed to making it work?" And I like, I think it's in Empower that you talk about if this is kind of a new concept or you just want to kind of put your toe into the water a little bit to try out just one project with this thinking, and one of the best ways to do it, and I think this is brilliant, is to do it during kind of the lame duck season, which would be like testing. Like you have, you know, your whole morning is shot because you're doing the state test, but you have all afternoon, and rather than just kind of plotting along like you normally would, you use that as a way to introduce this project. So you can really keep the-

John Spencer:
Yes. Yeah, or the week before winter break.

Tim Villegas:
Right.

John Spencer:
Yeah, I mean, those types of things.

Tim Villegas:
Right, right.

John Spencer:
For sure.

Tim Villegas:
Yeah, I think that's a great idea.

John Spencer:
Thank you.

Tim Villegas:
In fact, I even tried that with my class last year. I'm no longer a classroom teacher, I'm more of a consultant now with my district, but when I did have my classroom, we did audio interviews towards the end of the year where we would interview each other, and that was a really fun example of just something different. We are not writing a story, we're not ... like not everyone is doing the same thing, but everyone is getting access to something a little bit different, so that was really fun, and I encourage teachers to take those times where you're like, "Oh, you know, we don't have enough time to really go through the rest of this particular curriculum, so let's mix it up a little bit."

Tim Villegas:
So I want to talk about this idea of compliance in education, which was in the forward in Empower, and it really struck me that compliance should not be the end goal of education. And it kind of goes to this

idea that the classroom should be well organized and ordered and just so and students are doing exactly what the teacher is telling them to do. If there's any deviation, then the class is out of control, and it reflects against the teacher. I wanted to know if you would talk about that a little bit, and I guess give me your take on why compliance isn't enough.

John Spencer:

Yeah. So I kind of view it as a, like this was in the, right, it was in the forward. I put together kind of this spectrum and you start out at one side where students have no real agency at all. They're just following the rules, and that's compliance, and then they move into a place of engagement where they have some agency but it's still about what the teacher wants, right? So they're following a teacher, but at least things are interesting to them, right? But then when you move out of just student interest into like true ownership, then you're in that place where students are empowered.

John Spencer:

I think it's significant for a couple different reasons. I go to the heart of what we want from our kids, right? So if I'm a dad who's got three kids, I know a lot of parents, and if you ask parents, you know, "What do you want for your kid in life?" they'll say, "I want my kid to be a lifelong learner. I want my kid to be successful in a job. I want my kid to be a critical thinking democratic citizen." Those are the types of answers you get, and none of those answers ever include compliance.

John Spencer:

If you're a really great democratic critical thinking citizen who's engaged with your world, then compliance is not your goal. If you are going to aim for the creative economy and think like an entrepreneur and be different and push the envelope and be innovative, then you're probably not going to be aiming for compliance. If you're going to be a lifelong learner who pursues your interest and passion and studies things on your own, then you're probably not going to be compliant because that would mean you're waiting to be told what to do. So I kind of think like compliance is really in many ways the opposite of what we want from kids, what we truly want them to become as they grow up.

Tim Villegas:

Right, so, I guess, as a followup question about compliance, did you see, I guess, the behavior of your students change when you implement this design thinking? Like behavior as in difficult or challenging behavior.

John Spencer:

Yeah, so I would say this: The worst behaviors that I had in the class or those kind of cringe-worthy as a teacher, those moments where I shamed a kid or yelled at a class, those were always times where I was demanding compliance and I was trying to get students to follow me for the sake of following me rather than thinking about how to help them become self directed and self regulated and whatnot. They were also always the times when we were doing an assignment that was totally teacher directed, right? So they were the worst moments of teaching, but they were also very compliance driven.

John Spencer:

On the other hand, when students were designing things or when they were even doing choice-driven silent reading or when they were doing blogging or whatever, so not just design thinking but in general just the other types of things that we were doing where they felt empowered, they weren't a lot of discipline issues. I'm not saying it was perfect. There were still moments where kids would get upset or emotional, frustrated. I had groups where kids would have conflict with each other, but it was so much

easier in those moments to handle it as a learning opportunity whereas when it was in the midst of compliance it was almost always you jump to this overbearing discipline style.

John Spencer:

And so I really think like when students are truly empowered, behavior is less of an issue, and I know there are students on behavior plans. I'm not pretending that things are perfect. I think of those groups I had that I mentioned before when I taught self-contained or later when I taught an elective. I had students who were labeled as ED who, like I said, were on behavior plans, and things weren't perfect. You never knew completely what might cause a student to struggle and lose control and whatever, but I can tell you that the sense of control they felt, the sense of agency that they felt in owning their learning, actually like allowed them to thrive a lot more than when they were in a compliance-driven environment.

Tim Villegas:

That's really interesting. I'd love to hear more stories about that, especially from other educators too who have tried to implement the project-based learning design thinking, and I know in my own experience giving students choice and allowing them to follow their passions and interests really does help with engagement, but it also does help with behavior because if you have obsessive interests in your class and they're following through with that, they're less likely to really think or do anything else except that.

John Spencer:

Exactly. I had in my STEM class I remember because in the last couple years I taught STEM and photojournalism. This is after I taught the self-contained group, and we had students who had the biggest behavioral needs in our school, and they all were kind of in their own self-contained classroom, and then the only class they got to be mainstreamed into was their elective, and that meant I had them for STEM as a group. I remember hearing people are going to throw chairs and this is going to be this, this is going to be that, and you have some runners so just be cognizant of that, and they gave me a special walkie-talkie, and the truth is I didn't see those behaviors.

John Spencer:

I did have moments where, you know, there was a moment where a kid got upset with me. Not upset with me. He was upset because he was working on something he cared about and he was frustrated and he threw his folder down onto the table and, ["Arg 00:31:09]," and was angry, but they all, you know, despite that one moment, like I said, I didn't have the big, I didn't have the throwing of chairs, I didn't have any violent things happening to be honest. I think it's because they genuinely wanted to be there. They really found the class to be engaging, and it was very choice driven.

John Spencer:

I bring that up because I was warned ahead of time that, you know, I was told specifically, "I know you believe in student choice, but don't give them choice. They'll take advantage of you." Those were the words from a specialist, and that just wasn't my experience. I really believe in the idea that when we say all means all, we really mean it, and that includes choice, that includes student ownership. I really believe that every kid deserves access to that.

Tim Villegas:

Right, right. I love, love, love that you had that experience because that is a common thing that is said about students who are struggling with their behaviors is don't give in. They're being manipulative.

Don't give them an inch, because if you give them an inch, they're going to walk all over you, and then you're not going to have control. It's really nice to hear you say that because I think it's easy for people in the special education field to think that when they do give choice or even grace for certain behaviors that they're giving in or that they're letting themselves be walked over, but I think it's a mindset, right? You are not giving away anything except acceptance of who these students are. So you are believing in the students' best selves when you are giving-

John Spencer:
Yes, exactly.

Tim Villegas:
When you are giving them choice and saying, "How do you want to direct this? Where do you want to go with this?" To hear that students are able to make that choice and be successful with it, I would think that that's empowering, so, yeah, I love that. I don't want to take up too much of your time, so I want ... maybe we'll have one more question. I see you as a person that has a lot of vision, especially vision for just education in general. So where would you like to see education in the next 10 to 20 years?

John Spencer:
Oh, wow. I love that question.

Tim Villegas:
That's a big question, but ...

John Spencer:
Oh, man. You know, I think I'd love to see education become more project-based, more authentic. I'd love to see it become more connective, kind of breaking up the subjects and having things be interdisciplinary. I'd love to see us do away with tracking. I'd love to see multiple abilities, multiple grade levels even working together. I think that's what I would love to see. Yeah, but really focused on creativity. I'd love to see kids making and designing and building, having a lot more choice in what they're doing.

Tim Villegas:
What do you think it would take to really, for that to become a reality?

John Spencer:
I think one thing is it takes teachers valuing it and willing to take the creative risk themselves to make that happen. I think a lot of teachers believe in it but aren't necessarily going to do that because it feels scary and it feels different, and then I think there's a second piece that's important that I never want to deny and that's the policy piece. We have to define success in a different way than a standardized test. We just have to do, we have to do better than that, and I think that's a big piece of what gets in the way, too. We're ultimately going to value what we assess, and right now what we assess is standardized test results, and so things like lifelong learning or creativity or student choice or personalization or any of those things, differentiation, all of those things will just be buzzwords until kind of the policies change, and that's the hard work. I mean, that's the complicated side because policy changes are hard to pull off, but I think that piece has to change, too.

Tim Villegas:

Well, John, this has been a fantastic conversation. I want everyone to know to go ahead and look up Launch and Empower. Well, I know that they're available on Amazon, but are they available on your website as well?

John Spencer:

Yeah. Yeah, you can get it. So if you check out my website at SpencerAuthor.com, you'll see that the books are there, too.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. And thank you for your time.

John Spencer:

Thank you so much.

Tim Villegas:

That is our show. We would like to thank speaker and author John Spencer for joining us on the Think Inclusive Podcast. Make sure you check out his website, SpencerAuthor.com, and you can find him on Facebook and Twitter. Follow Think Inclusive on the web at ThinkInclusive.US, as well as Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, and Instagram. Today's show was produced by myself talking into USB headphones, a Zoom H1 Handy Recorder, MacBook Pro, GarageBand, and a Skype account. You can also subscribe to the Think Inclusive Podcast via Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, or Podomatic.com, the largest community of independent podcasters on the planet. From Marietta, Georgia, please join us again on the Think Inclusive Podcast. Thanks for your time and attention.

Follow Think Inclusive on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @think_inclusive.

Follow MCIE on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @inclusionmd.