

Cory Jennerjohn: Welcome to another WATG podcast. I am your host Corey Jennerjohn and I'm really excited to bring you the guest we have for today, Collins Seale. Colin Seale is the founder and CEO of thinkLaw and I'm also happy to announce that he is a keynote speaker for the WATG conference October 3rd and 4th at the Wilderness Resort in Wisconsin Dells. So Colin, first of all thanks a lot for joining us and please tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Colin Seale: Sure, sure, I'm so excited to be joining here at the podcast even more excited to be keynoting the Wisconsin gifted conference. So I really, really feel like my story is kind of a reflection of what happens when we as a system determine that it's not OK to leave genius on the table. And I say that because I kind of grew up like a lot of the kids who we struggle to survive in our system. Being on free and reduced lunch, having a lot of different challenges in a single parent home and even my dad was incarcerated for a decade for selling drugs. And as a kid in, that circumstance, I had his opportunity to get an excellent education almost by accident by being put into this gifted and talented program that changed the trajectory of my life. And now after kind of thinking about this idea of at very young age, that brilliance is distributed equally but opportunity is not. I get to do the work to create a space where stories like mine, where I was able to take this education and become a computer science graduate and, and teach math in Washington DC, in Las Vegas and go to law school and graduated top of my class and work at a big law firm and then start this organization thinkLaw where I combined it all together to teach critical thinking using real life legal cases in upper grades. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes in lower grades and do a ton of, of professional development and, and, and trainings for parents and families so that critical thinking is no longer a luxury good. I can go from a point where stories like mine are frustratingly an exception to the rule but now in a space where we can truly create a world where all kids will have an equal shot at being exceptional. So that's kind of what I do now in a nutshell really. Try to make it so that access to critical thinking is equitable and we're able to really give our kids the tools they need to lead to innovate and break what needs to be broken.

Cory: Well that's really interesting how Colin. How come, you know, coming from a really tough environment as a youth, how did you become exposed to gifted and talented programs that, like you mentioned, a lot of kids aren't, don't have access to?

Colin: So here's the interesting part about that, Corey. You know every year we start the school year there's always these memes that start going viral. About, like, how we shouldn't ask kids how they spent their summer vacation because some kids might have spent the summer vacation in Europe, some might have spent summer with abuela and it might be traumatizing. And what I say is this, I say you know what maybe some of our kids that went to Europe need to hear about that summer with that abuela and the magic that happened there. In the stories and experiences that happened there. Because ultimately when I look at my life and I look at the life of a lot of kids that go overlooked and underestimated this story is not a story of doing XY and Z despite what they've been through. It's doing XY and Z because of what they've been through. What they've been through defines who they are, how they are. When I grew up I got to see my mom be a textbook in critical thinking on a regular basis. Maximizing constraints, always figuring out a way to leverage resources. So as we start to kind of think about, like the

idea that a lot of what we're looking for in terms of potential might already be there, I can say, that in my experience, the big difference maker was that I had someone in my classroom that recognized that I was being, getting in trouble at least once a week but my behavior challenges came from a lack of being challenged. It's part of our work, part of why this is so important, part of why I am a huge champion for expanding giving the talented opportunities at a time where some people think that it's politically correct to contract those out those opportunities, to eliminate that, I say if we're committed to not leaving genius on the table, if we're committed to this idea of recognizing that we can stop talking about closing achievement gaps and start talking about shattering the achievement ceiling, it's just a real great opportunity to change that conversation. Shift that narrative because when we start looking at things from this gifted and talent perspective behavior looks a lot different. Like, like the expectations around like sitting still and being quiet look a lot different 'cause you wouldn't ask that of gifted and talented learners, right? So yeah.

Cory: What was your, you know, when you, when you say expand genius, Colin, what was your first reaction when you heard and saw that New York City was disbanding their gifted and talented program?

Colin: Well coming from Brooklyn that hit close to home, being born and raised in Brooklyn. But the other thing is, if you wanted to create from scratch the worst possible model ever, to create a gifted program that will be New York City, right, like, it's so ridiculous in the city that was like you know 80% black and brown kids 20% you know white kids, like the gifted program had like the flip demographics. They were only identifying kids at four years old. Things that were all crazy things that made it super clear that nobody had consulted or talk to anybody who knows anything about best practices and equity in education. That said, you cannot tell me that there aren't gifted children in every community, in every school, in every area. And the thing about gifted education that's really hard for folks to kind of wrap their heads around is that there's this duality and sometimes in education we have a hard time with that AND. This is a duality. So I can tell you that, that phrase that some people want to say in defense of eliminating gifted program and say "well all kids are gifted". I need to just say that that's not actually true. We talk about gifted education, we talk about kids who are gifted right. It's, it's a relative concept and, and, and the idea is that we, we've got a set of kids that are dealing with this kind of asynchrony. Where, where they're at intellectually, academically compared to their age maturity level puts them at a point where it can get a little bit funky and they're not getting specialized training and services they won't be able to be successful. Won't be able to kind of untap that full potential. And the thing is I don't have to lie I don't have to say all kids are gifted I can acknowledge that all kids have gifts and talents but not all kids meet that actual definition for what gifted is. All kids deserve to get their gifts and talents enriched, nurtured fulfilled, yes. And it's also true that there is not a child in the world who would not benefit from the kind of instructional strategies that tend to be reserved only for gifted and talented classes, right. So my view of this is a, yes and, kind of a deal. Like yeah, like I'm a big fan of school models that have decided every single child in that school is gonna have access to enrichment. Yeah that's something every kid deserves but you can't tell me that a kid who is at the 6th grade level in second grade doesn't need specialized support in services. So that's kind of how I respond to

that right just by taking it on and saying equity doesn't mean everybody gets nothing. That's madness. It's madness.

Cory: I agree 100%, Colin. How do you, what do you say then to school districts that say the biggest stumbling block to advancing gifted and talented or accelerated education is, is money or lack of funds? What do you, what do you say to that?

Colin: So let's talk about what that really kind of comes down to. A lot of times when they say lack of funds what they're getting into is this idea that, like hey you know what, I think gifted and talented advanced academics, I think those kids will be just fine. But we've got kids in special education, we've got English language learners, we got kids who are academically behind their peers and like you know it's the resources that we have are very scarce and it should go towards people who are having more problems and more challenges and different student populations. If that's the presumption 2 Part, 2 part come back to that. One how's that been working out for you right? It's one of the things that I've actually got from like different coaching programs that I've been a part of. Like just checking the data like this is what y'all been doing, how's that been working out for you? Two I started thinking about this idea that like you know we talk about this thing about like who might need it more but are you aware of the fact that you got kids who are special education students who are also gifted? Do you know that you have English language learners who are also gifted? Do you know that you have kids who might be academically behind their peers, who might be struggling, who, you know, might be two grade levels behind but still be gifted. So if we know all this we recognize we gotta have a broader model and what I say is, you talk about funding...Where is your money going to be more spent or, or better utilized? One of the concrete things I think about within this conversation around, like, you know, learning loss, is if you've got a kid who is in 3rd grade and is at a fifth grade level, right, in gifted education we might do an acceleration model for that kid. We might use curriculum compacting and only teaching the minimal that they need to know in 3rd grade so that they can kind of advance and get to where they need to be to push their heads to the fifth grade kind of concepts. But, you know, we have a lot more in education, we have a lot more 5th graders who are at a third grade level. But what if it was actually the case, which it is, that the same acceleration model that we used in gifted could work for that scenario that you are trying to figure out right now. You got funding for it right now. You got learning loss, ESSER funds right now for the same exact model. Why not use it to train more teachers in acceleration because if you got a fifth grader in third grade then you can't have him doing all of third grade review, all a fourth grade review. You can't send him to intervention for all these times where they're doing all this drill and kill stuff. We gotta accelerate them to the fifth grade level using just in time concept thinking about what exactly do they need to know from, from 3rd and 4th grade to do this lesson right here. So if we're doing it's like, like, like we recognize that in a lot of districts interventions don't work. The intervention system philosophy strategy is broken. Gifted education can be an informing strategy to raise the bar across the board. So that's what I would say, use the funding that we do have more creatively so we can raise the bar.

Cory: Wow that was a, that's a really incredible answer and I agree 100%. There's some interesting news with you Colin...there's a book coming out that that will be published May 27th, *Tangible Equity: A Guide for Leveraging Student Identity Culture and Power to Unlock Excellence In and Beyond the Classroom*. So first of all, what was the, what was the main inspiration behind this book?

Colin: So I'll tell you what happened. You know, I had done *Thinking Like a Lawyer* in my first book and then going around the country talking about closing a critical thinking gap, closing the critical thinking gap and we gotta do something about closing the critical thinking gap and I forgot to ask a fundamental question. I made a presumption that I really did not understand that I was missing, forgot to ask the question about whether or not our kids even had the psychological safety to be brilliant. Do they have the psychological safety to think critically or are they going to be an environment where, over here, I can be asking questions all the time and it's gonna be deemed disrespectful but in a different kind of classroom environment me asking questions could be inquisitive and curious. Over here I could be saying, hey, I don't think we should do it this way we should do it that way and I could be dinged for a willful defiance but in a different kind of classroom that would mean that I was a leader and an advocate. So when I started recognizing that there was this gap around the same time we're talking about the moment of racial reckoning around our country and folks started to approach me about doing like equity trainings, I'm like, I don't really do equity training. I've trained on critical thinking and the more I started thinking about it the more I saw the thinking and realizing, like you know, access to critical thinking is equity. In fact, in fact one of the things that could not understand, Cory, is that when you go across the nation, and I, I could actually pose this question right back at you, right. You across the nation and you look at people, you look at school systems that are committed to equity, right, like equity is an admission statement and magic plan and like you got teachers and principals that are committed to equity. Heart and soul. Forget about the naysayers right. Heart and soul. Why is it that sometimes those same educators still struggle with inequitable academic outcomes at the classroom level. With an inequitable disciplinary consequences at the classroom level. With inequitable access to gifted and advanced academics at a system level. Why is there the gap between what people feel in their hearts and soul when it comes to equity or what actually takes place in their day-to-day?

Cory: Because the, because what we want and what actually the actions, because what are said and done are two vastly different things.

Colin: So and they start thinking about that right. You think about what's said, what's done and you start realizing there's all these other things that start to happen. There is like, you know, like one more thing syndrome, right. This idea that if you give me one more thing I'm gonna lose my mind. So it's like, I, I can't, I can't, just take on doing an equity plan as an extra thing. Equity has to be the lens which I plan for everything else. I can start to feel like you know what, I like to call this other thing, like, the paper straw problem, you know. I can't stand paper straws, can't stand them. Like I love the environment. Environment is great but I cannot stand paper straws. But you know what, I hate even water paper straws the idea that I'm here with my paper straw I'm sticking in my little drink. It's getting all mushy my mouth but at the same

time there's a factory over there putting all kinds of chemicals into the air, is that plant over there that's putting all kinds of toxins into the water supply. But I'm here with my paper straw, supposed to be saving something? So sometimes, as an individual, I feel like what I'm doing in the name of equity is not enough. So when I looked at this book *Tangible Equity*, I started to think about, you know, what, what if we recognize that we actually had power? Power. We don't talk about power enough in education. But if we actually we realize we have power but I have power as a teacher every day to tell a kid, ask a kid how are you doing? And care about waiting for that answer, right. Like I've got power beyond my belief, at a time where teachers are feeling more powerless than ever, who actually have a lot of power. What if I could find out a way to use that power at an instructional level, to create a different kind of system? The other thing that I realized, Cory, was that I spent a lot of time in my career talking about, hey we gotta make sure kids know how to play the game. You gotta play the game. Like, hey man, you gotta do it this way so you can play the game. Actually the game is jacked up. The game is really messed up. And if the only thing we're teaching you is how to play the game, how will we ever see things become more just, more fair, more of a level playing field? So when I started to realize it's not enough to actually train you on how to navigate the system. We gotta give you the tools in your instruction to show you how to start to question and dismantle the system. We gotta make this so that you're not just learning how to play the game but you're becoming the kind of person that knows how to slay the game. So this is what we're really accomplishing in this book, through instruction, through a very practical set of tools that can help you, as a chemistry teacher, how to figure out on a Tuesday morning how to redesign this lesson. So that it gives kids more tools to lead, to innovate and break what needs to be broken as a part of, like, something that doesn't feel like one more thing.

Cory: Wow. that's that's pretty powerful. That's amazing.

Colin: I, I'll give you a very concrete example, just to kind of make sure I make it clear, okay?

Cory: Okay.

Colin: Precalculus. People don't love precalculus, right, it's not a big thing around, like, oh I've, I've got so many great memories about being in precalculus. And one of the hardest things of precalculus is function composition. Where it's like f of g of x and g of f of x , because you're plugging one function into another function. It gets very confusing. But you know what's not confusing for teenagers? Drama and conflict. And you wanna talk about drama that is more polarizing than you know transgender athletes and abortion and immigration combined? Whether or not it is appropriate to put pineapple on pizza. You could start a civil war over whether or not people think it's appropriate to put pineapple on pizza or if pineapple on pizza is equivalent to genocide. I don't know how this happened but I was watching this one classroom teacher talk about I, I was looking at the student work and students were doing compositions so well, I was like, what did you do? I didn't even see a really great notes. He was a first year teacher. They weren't making any mistakes. How did they get this so intuitively? Well we did this whole example about pineapple on pizza, had a little debate about it and then I asked them to draw a picture of what they think it would look like to put pizza on a pineapple. You serious?

So you took who kids were, how they were, you took conflict, you brought joy, you brought discussion, in pre calculus, to deeper the learning outcome. You deepen the learning outcome by putting in the shenanigans that are already a part of their lives. So sometimes a big point that I made in my last book, *Thinking Like a Lawyer*, is that cultural competency is about more than, like, throwing the name Tyrone in the math problem. It's about giving me these opportunities day to day to be able to connect this content to my world. To have a relationship with my fellow peers and scholars. That's why I'm a scholarly community. And to, in any way shape or form, connect what I'm learning in school to the world beyond school. So that's a map that we really stepped through piece by piece in a very practical way in *A Tangible Equity* book.

Cory: Wow, that's, that's amazing. I never, I've never really thought about, you know, breaking it down to that level. Like, simple as pineapple on a pizza, which by the way, I do not like.

Colin: My kids like it, my kids like, it's not my thing, but yeah.

Cory: And lastly, you know gifted and talented and accelerated education, Colin, you talk about, you know, breaking it down, getting it to the core level, you know. Moving, moving forward in the future where, you know, where does what does gifted and talented and accelerated education look like?

Colin: That's a great question. I think when it starts to look like is, what I would like to see it look like is, becoming a lot less polarized. I'm, I'm dreaming of a world, Cory, where, like, you know my best friend was like 6-4 in 6th grade. And it was absolute no brainer that he doesn't need to be playing basketball in gym class, in gym class with kids that are barely cracking 5 feet tall. It was a no brainer to have him go across the street and do practice and stuff at the high school. It was a no brainer. It made ,no no, nobody doubted that, right. It's like somebody is doing back flips in your living room at, like six years old, perfect form nobody, is gonna think that, that person is gonna get to the Olympics without specialized training and support. If somebody is playing something off for the radio by ear on the piano with no training, no one thinks that that kid is going to make it to Carnegie Hall without extra support. I wanna create a space where the way that we normalize supporting and nurturing talent in arts and athletics become something so commonplace in academics that we're no longer fighting this fight. And if nothing else we recognize the equity component of saying we're not gonna offer it through our public school systems 'cause we gotta understand that if we do not offer this to our public school systems, people with the means to get it are going to get it anyway. They're gonna take whatever tutoring class, whatever specialized things, whatever, and it'll create this whole extra level of the haves and have nots that don't allow us to create an equitable norm. So that's what I hope happens that we really detoxify this conversation around academic excellence and start changing that conversation altogether.

Cory: Well alright, Colin. I, I really appreciate the time. I really appreciate your insight and, like I said, we are really looking forward to having you as a keynote speaker October 3rd and 4th at the Wilderness Resort in Wisconsin Dells for the WATG Conference. And once again now, Colin, really appreciate it. Thanks a lot for hopping on The WATG podcast.

Colin: Alright, thanks so much Cory.

Cory: Thanks a lot.