

27 - Teaching in a Pandemic

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley Speaker: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So today we are lucky enough to have Danielle Couture with us. She's an early childhood instructor at several different colleges around the country.

She's presented for us several times at our early childhood conference and she's just awesome. She's also a parent and her daughter attends a child care center near her home. So welcome Danielle.

Danielle Couture Speaker: Thank you, thanks so much for having me.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Yes, thank you for being here and today you decided you were going to talk about teaching in a pandemic, which we're all going through, what is working and what is not. So why did you choose this topic?

Danielle Couture Speaker: So, I chose this topic because I am a teacher in this pandemic who had to shift to online.

My students are teachers who some of them shifted to online, some of their centers had closed, and my child is in a school that did not shift to online, but her home center closed and then months later she enrolled at the lab schools near our home where I teach. So, I know that this pandemic has really impacted everyone and teaching really had to change really almost immediately. I went from teaching in person, I was getting ready to head to campus one day on March 16th to becoming a virtual teacher in about a couple of hours and many of my students did the same thing or they were suddenly out of a job and many of the parents that I know were suddenly you know at a loss for child care.

So, you know my daughter's center had closed just a couple days later and here we are a year later and many of us are still teaching virtually. I know that two of the colleges that I teach for they've already decided to continue virtual classes for fall 2021. One of my students just noted today she's working in one of the large districts here in Michigan where I am, and they plan to continue out their school year being virtual.

So, you know online learning it might be here to stay for a long time, and I know that some of my adult students are really struggling with this format and we know that learning through screen time is really not ideal for children. The youngest learners I believe have struggled the most over this last year and we know that we need to get back to face-to-face instruction in early childhood and parents really need that quality face-to-face schools for all of their children so that they can do their own jobs. And you know just making sure that children can learn and can learn well. But we're trying to still kind of figure out how you know what what is safe, what's the best way to do this.

It's a year later and we're still struggling to make it all work. Some of the changes that I've seen are working really really well and they might change our industry forever, but I think that we do still have some work to do.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Danielle, you bring up a good point.

We're coming up on a year and there are certainly things that have been advantageous and positive for us as a society in education and just as a society in general but there's also things that we could possibly do a little differently you know for a more positive outcome. Can you speak to the things that you see that we might be able to do differently?

Danielle Couture Speaker: Sure, yeah, I really hope that, you know, every industry learned very quickly that quality childcare and in-person learning is really necessary for the whole world to function. I hope that this leads to stronger relationships and respect for schools, childcare centers, and teachers. Mostly, I hope that funding to keep these programs running will permanently increase, that federal and state funding can increase so that all children have access to education without those tuition costs increasing to levels that really just aren't sustainable for many families.

I'm hoping that you know we start to see early childhood education as the necessity that it is, and that teachers are, you know, essential to everyone. We can work a little harder as a society to show that value, but right now, today, I would love to discuss health and safety in schools.

You know, I was a Head Start teacher for many years, and over 10 years in the classroom, I was always getting sick, right? I noticed that a lot of the parents would seem kind of upset if their child was sent home with symptoms. I had to fight with our school system and with our parents, really, to get everyone on the same page: that my health, and the health of everyone in the classroom, was really important, and that children who had any symptoms had to stay home from school.

So, I think that one great change we may have already felt today with this pandemic is that families are more aware of the symptoms of illness in their children or themselves, and how sending children to school with a cough or sneeze could really put teachers, children, and families at risk. So, I know that many, many school staff are working really hard to keep the environments clean and safe---doing different temperature screenings or symptom checklists every day, just trying to make sure that everyone is really healthy before they enter a school, and increasing hand washing and disinfecting procedures.

So, I think that's one really positive thing I've seen happen over this last year: we're really working harder to make our schools a healthier environment. But I know that also takes time and materials, so that's kind of where I go back to that increase in funding that needs to be a priority.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: I cannot agree with you more, and I think everyone that is probably listening right now agrees too, because we have all seen these things. I know, as a teacher, I saw students that would come to school sick. I would try to send a student home if they were running a fever, and parents just did not want to or could not pick them up, and so 100% I understand there. So, what are some new things you're seeing that are working that may help those teachers and administrators out there right now that are still struggling? Because we know there's teachers in school, we know there's teachers out of school. Are you seeing anything that has really helped you this year that really stands out in your mind, that somebody that's listening could help them today?

Danielle Couture Speaker: Sure, I have had the opportunity to observe some of my students that are doing some virtual teaching with their students at home. It's a really interesting process, trying to capture that attention and interest through a screen for children that are three, four, or five years old. But they are working so hard to make it work and to share lots of resources with families. You know, getting ready for this podcast today, I did reach out to some of my colleagues, one of them who used to work as an ABA therapist. So, she was working with children that had some special needs, and she used to work in the home. But, very quickly, that stopped, and she explained that they kind of went into crisis intervention mode, where she was just working virtually with the families to try to help them to get through the day, to get through one crisis after another.

So, as always, I think that I have seen teachers step up to the plate. You know, like I myself had a couple of hours to get ready for this change, and I've seen the same thing with so many other professionals that have anything to do with education just kind of figure it out. And we all figured it out very quickly and did what we needed to do.

Some of the districts around where I live, teachers were going in to just distribute food, just to make sure that families had enough food to get what they needed. I have another colleague of mine that was driving around her community, where she teaches, and dropping off laptops, making sure that children had access to that.

So, you know, those relationships with families---that's always going to be so important in education. But now, we have some major barriers to having access to the families, so trying to look at what we can do to access them more efficiently. I know that technology has made so much possible during this time, and trying to use it to our advantage.

We have all gotten a lot more familiar with Zoom and different ways to reach each other through that. But I know that a lot of the early childhood centers that I have access to are using different apps. Apps like Remind was one that I have used, and then Brightwheel. I'll talk a little bit more about Brightwheel just because that's what I have the most experience with. But there are so many different apps out there that work to connect schools with families.

I'm not sure that we're really using those apps to, you know, their full potential just yet. So, I would love to see all of us maybe kind of shift a little bit away from paper and pen, and trying to get more used to using electronic formats for all of these different apps.

So, Brightwheel, as I was mentioning, there's a section to upload lesson plans. At my daughter's school, they're not really using that section. There's a way to upload pictures, and they do use some pictures, but that could be used for documentation of work samples or electronic portfolios. You could be using that for assessments, but they're not quite using it that way.

So, I would like to see, in the months ahead, us all trying to work to find the best ways to use this information and share it with those families, making sure that lesson plans and assessments are accessible to families. I know not every family might want to see that information, but I do---so maybe they all do, you know?

And just trying to have a little more two-way communication between the families and the schools, and that's all available in these apps. I think we just need to be a little more intentional in the way that we're using them.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Danielle, you've given us so many great resources just to kind of wrap our minds around. And, you know, you kind of spoke to the fact that this is a new level of communication with our families and our parents. And, honestly, our parents are overwhelmed.

So, do you have any advice for educators or families just on, you know, how to deal with the lack of communication, or just the overwhelming communication, but just how to really stay focused on positive family partnerships throughout this time?

Danielle Couture Speaker: Absolutely. And, you know, just trying to increase that communication. The families are overwhelmed, so maybe learning a new app might not be something that they feel like they can do right now, especially if they are in crisis mode.

But, you know, a good old-fashioned phone call really goes a long way. So, if we could try to make sure that those teachers have just a little bit of time to reach out by phone once or even twice a month, just for five minutes, just to share information about: *What is your child doing at school today?*

I know that at my daughter's school, they're still using a newsletter every month, and we all love the newsletters, right? It's got the calendar and all the events and what the classrooms are kind of focusing on right now. So, those types of communications---they shouldn't end. We should still continue to do them, but maybe just try to find a few other ways to touch base.

We can try to send emails out, you know, once a week, twice a week, but that is going to take some time for those teachers. So, making sure that they have the resource of time to really work on this communication strategy and try to have some more two-way communication.

So, you know, I mentioned quite a bit about these different apps that schools have. But, are parents able to send lots of messages? Are they able to access the teacher or the director of the program? Are they encouraged to use that app to have some two-way communication going back and forth?

And, if none of those are working, as I stated, really, the phone call---that can do a world of wonders. So, sharing the technology or using the technology, share those pictures of the work, assessment, and then have some connections to the at-home activities.

I think it's wonderful, especially as a professional in early childhood education. I want to know what my child learned today. I want to know what she was doing, and I want to practice that at home with her. So, you know, there is a short amount of time for those transitions during drop-off and pickup.

But, at my daughter's school, parents are asked not to enter the building. So, I drop her off, you know, right at the sidewalk or the front door. It's, as I said, I'm here in Michigan, and it is still pretty chilly.

Maybe, if we just took it to, you know, just kind of check in: How are things going at home? How was the weekend? You know, she was counting yesterday, and she counted all the way up to 10. Like, I would love to have those exchanges.

And, since the staff person is coming outside anyways to pick up my daughter, just trying to take that little bit of extra effort to share those personalized messages.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: I totally agree with that, Danielle. And, when I was an administrator, that is something that I tried to encourage my teachers to do.

So, as we wrap up, what are three takeaways that you have for our listeners today that you want them to know?

Danielle Couture Speaker: You know, I think that relationships with the children and families will always be the key to success in education. And, having access to quality childcare and education really does influence the economy and the workforce of society. So, we really need to keep that in mind.

And, remember that the needs and the safety of those early childhood education professionals---they have to be a priority for everyone in order to keep the systems working.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Perfect.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Danielle! That's so great. And then, on a final note, as we exit, do you just have one challenge that we can present our listeners with today?

Danielle Couture Speaker: I do. So, building these relationships with families---I challenge everyone to incorporate two-way communication methods between centers and families. I'm sure everyone is doing that already, but let's try to step it up just one more way and try to get just a little more communication flowing.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Danielle, this has been awesome information, and I know everyone is going to resonate with every one of our listeners. So, thank you so much for being here today. We can't wait to see you at our conference. We can't wait to have you on again.

Thank you, and good luck for the rest of the year. And, if you're here listening with us today, we will see you back in a couple of weeks.