

41 - Courageous Conversations in the Preschool Classroom

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha 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: 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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Today, we are so excited and honored to have with us Dr. Teresa Handy. She's a colleague from our Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education Leadership Program, and she's a former kindergarten teacher and early learning specialist.

She has taught first, fourth, and fifth grades. She has a passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and most recently served as the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at an Episcopal all-girl school in the South. She is also an author, and her book, **I Have an Elephant in My Ear**, is a resource created to help children understand children with hearing loss, and it's also a great start to these courageous conversations with young children.

We are so excited to talk about these courageous conversations today with Dr. Handy. Teresa, welcome. Thank you for being here.

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, let's jump right in.

Today, Teresa, we're going to talk about courageous conversations in the preschool classroom. So why is this topic something that's important to you?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Well, I have really found the preschool classroom to be one that is not immune to conversations about race, and they often come up when children are playing and engaging with one another. So, for me, as a preschool teacher, I really did not want to shy away from these conversations, but I saw colleagues struggling with that.

So, I want to help teachers move from that, let's be friends, we're all alike, or even let's play nicely, and really help our youngest learners learn how to appreciate differences.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: You know what? That's so important because we really do find a value in celebrating the uniquenesses and the authenticity of our children in our communities. So, what would be a good starting point for our teachers, our listeners, who really want to begin to create this inclusive classroom community, but don't know where to start?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Right.

You know, it's so important to understand that inclusion benefits all students. So sometimes starting from that place is really important, because when we help our students understand that concept, it helps them develop those soft skills

that they'll need in the workforce, like how to get along with others and how to value different points of view. So, if we know that the inclusive classroom is good, then how do we make that happen? We can help the students develop their strong social, emotional, and academic needs, right? And so, when we do that, we do that through looking at our space.

So, we want to think about how our students are seated in the classroom. And notice, I'm not really talking about race at this point, because I really want teachers to look at inclusion as a real global, you know, attack, not really just kind of looking at it through the race lens. So, think about how your physical seating is set up in the classroom.

Think about how your students learn throughout the day. Is it a dark space? You know, maybe you want to introduce, you know, lamps or different lighting. Think about swapping your schedule around.

Maybe you want to do reading instead of math at a different time. And then also think about where you're standing and how you are delivering your lessons. So, think about props, move around, create fun seating, and give your students different ways to produce their work.

So, popsicle sticks are great, cameras, giving them clay or paint. And you know, I don't know about you all, but when I was in school, my teachers separated the reading groups by colors, right? And they had the blue for the high group and green was the lower group. And it was really clear, even to the students, who the, you know, higher readers were.

So how do we, you know, think about color coding our classrooms to eliminate any perceived hierarchy? And then how do we use letters and numbers to do that? And then think about nonverbal attention getters. I know when my kids were little, I used 3, 2, 1. And so when I say nonverbal, I mean, holding up your hand and then, you know, using your fingers to count back, but then also not using those bells and not using those other noise, you know, tools that we have, because those don't really appeal to students who have learning issues, hearing issues.

And then, you know, offering pencil grips and highlighters and other speech to text tools to all students and not just one group of students, creating those sensory spaces for all students, maybe having a no perfume zone, a no smell markers.

I know teachers love those smell markers, but those can be triggering sometimes for students. And having that soft music in the background or that white noise can also help those students who have some of those attention issues and those sensory issues. And then finally, these three points I really want teachers to think about.

How do you display your artwork and what does your classroom library look like? Make sure that all voices and faces can be seen in those choices. And also look at your discipline policy. Make sure that it's balanced and that you are following the same process for each student so that, you know, they don't see any kind of differentiation how you're disciplining one student.

We often think that we have to be the expert, but why don't teachers consider their families as experts? So, connecting with them and helping them create a more inclusive classroom is also useful because maybe you have a Jewish family, or a Muslim family that can bring their culture into your classroom, and that student will feel more empowered and more supported because you have invited them in.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, Dr. Handy, all of this stuff is so important and so relevant in schools today because there is so much diversity, which is amazing for our classrooms. And diversity can mean lots of things, we know that.

So why do you think the things that you just stated, why do you think those things are so difficult for teachers to incorporate? Or like the conversations you were talking about, why are those so difficult for us to have? What do we need to know as teachers to be able to start doing this and feel confident about it?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Right, right. You know, teachers like to be the expert. They like to be the one who knows, right? And in this case, they may not feel that way.

These conversations are really hard for adults to have with one another. And so, you can imagine how hard it is for us to engage with young children. So instead of trying to take these big ideas, you know, and try to, you know, make them

easier for children to understand, let's just start where the child is and build capacity, right? And that's what teachers have to do.

So, one of the things that teachers can do is explore their own understanding of diversity. Like what kind of work have they done to reconcile how they were raised with their work as an educator? It's not enough to say, I don't [see color teachers] to see the identities of the children they're working with. And you have to be ready to support their identity development.

The other thing you have to do is really become comfortable talking about the differences by reading books where other people have talked about their journey. So, **Waking Up White** by Debbie Irving is a great resource because it details a woman's experience of understanding race in this country. You also want to think about your own life.

You know, if your life is very homogenous, like if you don't have, you know, caregivers, doctors who are diverse, or if your child's play group is not diverse, think about how you can add those kinds of, that type of diversity with intention throughout your life. If you feel like you aren't getting, making enough headway, talk to your parents who are diverse in your classroom, talk to your neighbors, reach out to your church, and really try to find out how you can broaden your perspective. And ask your school leader to provide professional development sessions with a diversity practitioner expert.

You want to have this conversation in a safe space with an expert. And then finally, be ready because it never fails that a student will say to another student, "I can't play with you because your skin is dark". Or in my case, my daughter was told that her friend didn't want to play with her because her skin was dirty.

And so instead of teachers panicking, teachers need to really build capacity, so they feel comfortable by following those steps I just talked about.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: I think that's so important. It's definitely a process as our young teachers, and even our veteran teacher's kind of go into this uncomfortable territory.

But ultimately, that is where we as educators grow. I love the fact that you have spoke to the relationships and the partnerships with administration, with families, and with children that you're building. Do you have some suggestions for us in building those relationships with our families that might, you know, bring them in as an equal partner? Because like you said, they know their child and their background, and they have so much to give us and bring us.

Do you have any suggestions on how we can just start to build that partnership?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Right. The school-to-home partnership is so important. So, one of the things that teachers can do is they can, instead of just having that typical get-to-know-you form, they can actually have meetings with their parents, and a lot of centers are doing that.

But really try to figure out where is an area in your classroom that I may need some help, and then try to find a family that can help you. So, ask families, what is something that you're doing at home that you'd like to share in our classroom? What is a book that you're reading that you found interesting that our classroom may find interesting around maybe Diwali or Black History Month, or if you're, you know, Hispanic Heritage Month? All of these things are so important, and teachers don't have to be the expert. You can reach out to your community.

You can reach out to your families, and they can share what they're doing in their home to celebrate. And now with so many things being virtual, you can tap into your museum resources. You can tap into tours and things that are done virtually to kind of help support this level of inclusion that is so important in the classroom.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That is just, those are great ideas. And Teresa, you know, I know as a teacher, when I was teaching all of these things, I had to do lots of research on the different cultures that were in my classroom, the different types of disabilities that I had in my classroom. And I was always trying to really build that relationship with the families

so that they could help me understand also, because they are the expert at their children and, you know, their culture and what their family experiences are.

So, as we wrap up, what are three takeaways that you want our listeners to remember today when they walk back into their classroom or work with other families?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Yes, I think it's so important for teachers to feel that it's okay to be uncomfortable, but it's not okay to stay that way. Like they need to continue to learn and grow. Use literature if you don't have the words.

I know when I was in the preschool classroom, we used **Don't Touch My Hair** as a book that talks about a little girl who's like, don't touch my hair. Because, you know, when you see little girls in a classroom, their hair is so puffy, they may have beads and it may look so, they want it like cotton, you want to touch it. But we use hula hoops and role playing to demonstrate boundaries with literature.

That book, **Don't Touch My Hair**. So, find books if you're not comfortable. And then finally, really take time.

If something happens in your classroom, comfort the little child who was affected. A lot of times we rush and reprimand the child who said or did something offensive. But in this instance, it's so important to comfort the child who was impacted by those words or deeds.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Wow, I'm processing through that last one in here. I can, you know, visualize a situation happening in classrooms. And as the observer, you're, you know, I've seen this happen.

So that really kind of flips the perspective and also makes it something that we can teach kindness and tolerance and also just what is acceptable. And I love, love, love that. Can you give our listeners a challenge as we end our session today?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Yes, I think it would be so exciting if all the listeners took some time to walk into their classroom and just to look around and ask themselves, do they see all forms of diversity represented in their room? From literature to posters, to the activities they're choosing, to the supplies they're providing.

Do all of these reflect who is in the classroom being educated? So, looking through your construction paper, you know, looking at your markers, looking at your crayons. And then I want all the educators to reflect on each new activity that they're bringing to the classroom and make sure that it continues to support their inclusive efforts.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Dr. Handy, that was a great session because we really need to make sure that our teachers know that just to be brave, just to get out there, do research, learn about the families, keep learning and try to put some of these into classroom practice, right?

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Right, exactly.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, thank you so much for being here and just reminding us how important it is. We appreciate your time so much.

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Thank you, Dr. Handy.

Dr. Teresa Handy Speaker: Bye.