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Pandemic & Education: A Conversation Between Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

When Oregon public schools closed in March 2020 due to COVID-19, Jake, Eric, and Anna were headed into the full-time student teaching segment of their year-long teacher preparation practicum experience. While everyone has faced uncertainty during the pandemic, these beginning teachers also shared unique challenges. In April they came together for a conversation with a NWJTE editor to talk about their experiences, the obstacles and opportunities facing schools right now, and their hopes for their students and themselves. All three envision a 2020-2021 school year focused on equity, inclusivity, and the importance of access for all children.

Keywords

Teacher candidates, pandemic, education, COVID-19

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Pandemic & Education: A Conversation Between Teacher Candidates

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When Oregon public schools closed in March 2020 due to COVID-19, Jake, Eric, and Anna were headed into the full-time student teaching segment of their year-long teacher preparation practicum experience. While everyone has faced uncertainty during the pandemic, these beginning teachers also shared unique challenges. In April they came together for a conversation with a NWJTE editor to talk about their experiences, the obstacles and opportunities facing schools right now, and their hopes for their students and themselves. All three envision a 2020-2021 school year focused on equity, inclusivity, and the importance of access for all children.

Keywords: Teacher candidates, pandemic, education, COVID-19

Background

Jake Carlsen is a former commercial photographer, web designer/developer, and content manager for various eCommerce organizations. During the time of Covid, he can be found either in his office pondering the challenges of student teaching at a distance or wandering the house singing at the top of his lungs with his two children. He received his Bachelors in English Literature and Creative Writing from Marylhurst University and is currently student teaching 8th grade English Language Arts in Happy Valley, OR.

Eric Jensen is a recovering hipster-musician and lifelong lover of the arts. He holds a Bachelors in Art Practice from Portland State University. In the time of Covid, after dinner and before bedtime, he can usually be found throwing frisbee in the yard with his two sons and wife. He is currently student teaching 9-12 grade Jewelry at a large high school in Portland, OR.

Anna Krytenberg is currently student teaching general music for grades k-5 at a suburban elementary school in the Portland area. She received her Bachelor's degree in music education from Portland State University. Throughout her college education she has worked several jobs, and taught music privately. She has been a resident of Oregon her entire life.

Introduction

Maika Yeigh, Editor (MY): I appreciate the three of you sitting down with me to talk about how things are going for you right now. This has been such a stressful and uncertain time for everyone and I think teacher candidates have a unique experience, in the virtual classroom space as well as in the larger world context. What are some of the biggest challenges you see right now?

Eric: Confronting the inequity of a quick pivot to distance learning. I think that the inequity in this approach is so obvious that administrations are looking past it so that they can do “something” and my fear is that it’s more about protecting the current system and the funding that supports it. It feels like, rather than produce content for distance learning, teachers should be figuring out ways to engage students in supporting their mental health and maintain relationships in their household, in order to avoid trauma. We can catch students up on content - we do it all the time, but attempting that without mending the harm done by stress and the potential dangers of being in unfortunate living environments is a much more challenging endeavor.

Anna: Student participation, because you can’t guarantee that all students are getting the same access to the materials that you are putting out. So as much as you want it to be an equitable learning situation, it isn’t. No matter what you do.

Eric: That’s been my biggest struggle, too. The whole idea of adding to students’s stress and then asking students to participate and not really knowing about the environment they are working in. I don’t know who can actually access the content that I am putting out there.

Anna: Exactly, like what do you do for the students who don’t have internet at all and don’t have those devices and then aren’t getting any of your emails or anything like that? What do you do for those students? Especially if they are in kindergarten and haven’t learned how to read yet completely, either? I don’t know ... I worry about my students, because I understand that the classroom is the only safe place for some of them. For those students, enduring the nightmare of being forced to stay home in terrible situations is going to trump completing any work I’m assigning them.

Jake: That has been a really big struggle for us. Right now I’ve been fortunate, I feel, that I get about two-thirds of my students who engage with the lessons we are putting out there. But for the third who aren’t, it is a struggle to contact the parents and find out what is going on. How much do you pester them to try to get their kids in front of the screen because there could be an access issue or it could be that life events are going on right now and it’s been really hard. The school’s been doing a lot of it for us but it has

been hard to navigate, who to reach out to and who not to reach out to. How's lesson planning going for everyone else? We are only allowed to teach one topic each week. Which has been a massive shift for us. We've always been doing two or three things at a time so students are not stagnating on one topic. Instead we are expected to draw it out for an entire week.

Anna: We do two music lessons per week. One is on core content stuff that my CT (Cooperating Teacher) puts out and the one is more creative arching exploratory that I put out. So it's like getting both sides of the music coin.

Eric: It's been okay for me. We split it up a little bit so that I'm doing the bulk for this first unit and then my CT is going to plan and I am going to adapt it for my students. So there's options but I've made it super clear that the goal here is to do no harm, so if they can do it--great. And if they can't do it, then whatever they can do is fine.

Jake: What about face-to-face? Do you get any of that? My district shut it down completely.

Eric: We are using Flip Grid. so we are not getting any synchronous face-to-face but we are definitely trying to respond in a way so we can see each other a little bit. Sometimes they are able to reply to each other's Flip Grids and stuff like that.

Anna: At my school we are only using SeeSaw exclusively for all the "specials" [music, PE, Library, Counseling, & Technology] so it is all asynchronous teaching. So we see videos and picture submissions of what the students are working on and we can comment on every single one but the students can't see each other's work, it's only for the teachers.

Jake: So they can't do anything in community at all? Even synchronous sharing?

Anna: They can comment to each other in personal, private comments but there is no group chatting.

MY: And that is just because of their age--is that right, Anna?

Anna: Yes, it's because they are all minors. It's to keep everything private and secure and away from abuse. But I really like SeeSaw. It is super easy to use. You can plan all your activities ahead of time and schedule them to be posted at a certain time and it will automatically post.

Eric: I think it's probably not a new problem, and that student teachers have always been faced with this, but the problem of the methods and strategies in the educator program intersecting with veteran teachers and conventional wisdom. We spend hours and hours examining strategies for delivering instruction in the most efficient and equitable manner, and then we're in the classroom swimming upstream trying to plug those methods in where we can, assuming Cooperating Teachers (CT) are open to our suggestions. The divide between conceptual and actual practice is vast and teachers who have been doing this a long time have settled into systems that work for them. I'm fortunate that my CT is open to my ideas, but it's been uncomfortable several times answering his questions about his strategies, while trying to stay diplomatic enough to remain heard. I'm cognizant of the fact that I'm here to learn and he's the professional in the room, so managing those interactions is tricky.

MY: You must be thinking of fall and how you're going to need to start the year, whether it's going to be face-to-face, whether it is going to be virtual. Regardless, you are going to be working with kids who have not been in school for several months. So, what are you thinking about? What are some of the plans you are making? How are you processing that?

Jake: All three of us are Humanities, which I think is an advantage, we are more able to tailor our assignments to be personal and we can do community work and have them working together and get our community back into place because they won't have it for five months. I wonder how that will happen in math classes and other subjects? It feels like an opportunity ...

Eric: It feels like across the board the initial time for establishing community norms is going to take a little bit longer. I think we are going to have to be okay with that and allow ourselves to be patient and let it take longer than usual.

Anna: I think we are going to need to increase the fun element for sure, for at least the first month, month and a half, make sure you really have that catch to draw them back in. Of course, a lot of them will desire that structure in the classroom but some of them are not going to want to have a daily routine with actual work. So easing them back into that and the daily learning.

Eric: It might be a good opportunity to get students into doing group work. My students have been reluctant to do a lot of group work mainly because we haven't done a lot of it. But I think students are going to be hungry for interactions and hopefully they're going to want to work together.

Jake: I've been thinking that we are setting kids up so well for station learning right now. Because we're doing asynchronous learning they get to move at their own pace. And it's been making me think--why not keep that part of the distance learning we are doing right now? And keep that going in the classroom. I like the idea of allowing students to move through the work at their own pace and then travel. They might want to work on one thing and then go steps 1, 3, 5 instead of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and come back to 2 and 4. And I think what we are doing right now, at least in my classroom, is training kids for that kind of routine. I'd love to keep doing that, just because I think it will make accommodations easier going forward for kids on both the high end and the low end of the spectrum.

Eric: I think this is a good opportunity to reimagine this factory model of school we are in, how dated it is. It seems like we have the opportunity for a hard reset here. I think that students will be eager to return to school. I think that many of them will want to "just get back to normal." That being said, I think that it's going to be imperative that we open ourselves up to the process of healing the harm created during this isolation. We're going to have to be very sensitive to the difficulty of transitioning back to the factory model. What we would normally contend with during the first part of the year, just dealing with procedures and pacing and classroom norms, after the summer slide, will be more intense and take longer. We need to be okay with that, and allow students the flexibility to get back into the swing of things. This is my hope - that this experience will inspire educators and administrators to start to consider a movement away from the factory model. I doubt it will happen, but it would be great. There is a lot happening during distance learning that could remain in place and allow students more choice and flexibility to explore the subjects that inspire them.

MY: It will be interesting to see what happens as we start again. Anna, you mentioned routines and kids will be so unused to school routines and practice. Kids are going to be out of routines, and out of practicing interactions, and some of them will have been in situations for several months now that are pretty traumatic--food scarcity concerns and monetary concerns. It feels like in the fall everyone is going to have to be sensitive to all of those aspects of kids. I'm also curious about standards. One teacher friend mentioned that the first week they were off school, the district said "Kids kids, just take care of the kids" but by the second week they were saying, "Standards, standards--now start hitting those standards. How are you meeting all of the standards?" I'm curious to know in the fall which way schools will go. Are they going to be pushing teachers to hit all the standards? Are they going to be letting teachers build community? Are they going to be helping teachers figure out how to build community after such a long hiatus? And how are we going to start something different? Because it is going to need to be different than it has been after being out of school so long.

Jake: I'm starting to get a glimpse at the curriculum I'm teaching next year. I'm worried--and it seems strange to worry about my advanced students--but the IB program is so structured about what they have to learn and when that I'm not sure there is going to be room, I'm not sure they will let us have room to have community building happening and routine-setting and things like that. It seems odd to me that it is the advanced students I'm going to have to worry about. The rest I'll have the freedom to do that.

MY: There are a lot of uncertainties right now. How are you coping? How are you managing that in your brain? Are you just worrying about right now ... right now?

Anna: I'm dealing pretty well! I'm letting myself get distracted by other things. I'm trying really hard not to focus on a lot of those things. I'm also good at compartmentalizing, so shove that in a box and take it out later when I want to. There is really no use worrying about it if I can't change it. And if I don't know the answer then I'm getting anxious about it for reasons I can't control. To some degree you can't stop that happening but you can try to stop your cycle of thinking when you get on that track and distract yourself with something you know you can get into that can be more positive. For me, I've turned to more crafting and staying busy with knitting and making things and playing music. Trying to find little ways to at least do something every single day so you are not stuck in the monotony of nothingness and then getting stuck in the worrying and anxious mode because you don't have anything to do and you feel like you need to be doing things and there are a whole mess of things there. Finding healthy distractors.

Eric: We've been doing a lot of just spending time together and that's nice. I don't really have time to get hung up on it. I've had some rough days where I just think, gosh, not only do I not have a job in the fall but I also don't know whether that's going to happen and it is going to have a major impact on how we get back to normal. I don't know; it's been hard but I'm trying to spend the days as positively as possible. But I'm incredibly fortunate, and so the first thing I try to do is remember that my situation is not normal. I'm coping with the uncertainties by spending time with my kids, catching up on my sleep, completing projects that have been on the list for too long, nurturing my relationships as much as possible and enjoying delicious food and drink. We've been cooking meals and spending more mealtimes together in my house. It's been lovely. I think there is very little I can do about the uncertainties in education, so I'm trying to focus on what's in front of me and make sure my family comes out of this with the understanding that we can have fun and be cared for together.

Jake: Absolutely. As far as actual coping mechanisms, I don't have much to say beyond what Anna and Eric have said. I mean, I have been noticing in relation to the teachers

I've been working with, we student teachers have an advantage right now in the fact that everything we are doing right now is new. All year long it's been new. So, as long as we keep trying to roll with the punches as we have done this year anyways, you know, I don't want to say it's easy to shift into the distance learning, but cognitively, emotionally, culturally we are a little more set up for it just because everything is new, very new. Our routines for thirty years are not being disrupted, right? Everything is new for us, so this has just been a really good learning opportunity. I mean, this could repeat next year if there is another wave that happens we could have other shutdowns and if anything we are getting training that can help with that. I don't feel fortunate that this is happening right now, but I am trying the silver lining.

Eric: All of us are learning flexibility, it's great.

MY: In thinking of the fall and the students you will be working with then, what do you want your future students to know?

Eric: I'd like my students to know that I am really in their court and I'm in this with them with whatever they want to achieve. I'm going to be working to know them and to understand my place in their lives. And to be a positive part of their life. I want my students to know that I care about them. That I want them to achieve their dreams and live their best life. I value their experience and their talent and I believe in them. I'll work hard to assist them in achieving their goals. Mostly, I hope they know that I'm interested in not just their achievements, but their wellbeing. And I hope they make some good art, too.

Jake: I guess the biggest thing I would want to share with them is that I have been in awe of the resilience I have seen, with the kids who are engaging, at least, and how--I know now through their counselors--one of the challenges these students are facing in the learning, so when they come back next year and are in the classroom, just all of them have made it through this thing and the fact that they are still showing up is just inspiring, I've just been really impressed with what I've seen them do.

Anna: I would want my future students to know that the music classroom is a place where they can go to escape and focus more on having fun and be creative and explore their emotions and really let out who they are and that's the safe place to do that. And no matter where they are coming back to in the fall, that's what we will make time for. Music theory doesn't matter as much, we are going to work on creativity.

MY: What haven't I asked you? If I wasn't here what would you talk about?

Jake: How many meetings are you two going to? I've worked in the tech industry and I thought that was absurd how many meetings we had. But this week we are finally toning it down. The administration finally is forcing us to slow down with the meetings. Up to this point, I've been in meetings two to three hours per day, every day.

Eric: It's been nothing like that for me. I'm doing a PLT meeting on Wednesday morning and then a couple check ins during the week. My wife is having meetings daily for first grade. I'm sorry to hear that you have been spending two to three hours each day. That sounds miserable.

Anna: That's a lot!

Jake: It's slowing down. I was resisting commenting about it, but luckily another teacher brought up that we do not need to meet every day ... this doesn't need to happen anymore.

Eric: How are you all structuring your roll-out? Are you putting it all up on Friday to release on Monday morning? Or are you staggering it throughout the week?

Anna: I only post once per week. So, I just prep it the Tuesday before so it is in SeeSaw and it automatically posts at 8:00am every Wednesday. And then the students interact with it whenever they want.

Eric: Did you also design a paper packet for pick up?

Anna: Yes, we hand out music packets and we did hand out Chromebooks to students.

Jake: I try to do 90 percent of the lesson planning by Sunday night. I post it Monday morning, and sometimes I do a mid-week update in case everyone seems to be moving through it quickly. I usually treat those updates as supplementary, I usually sneak in some fun reading I call 'Mr. Carlsen Specials' and it's been going pretty well so far. The only downside is you have those students who do it all on Monday. I've had two so far who come to me Wednesday and ask "What else can I do?" So I've been talking about staggering our release time but the district doesn't seem to want that. They want everything upfront unless it is supplementary.

Eric: We've had a really great sense of support from my administration. It's all been very encouraging, asking teachers to take care of themselves, take care of their families, and providing students opportunities without stressing anybody out. I feel really happy to be part of that and that they have the right idea. We are going to do the best we can

for students, not give them a burden, provide them some options. I appreciate that. Some of us are working harder than we normally would.

Jake: Have there been any cross-discipline ideas going on with you? I'm starting a digital storytelling project and I floated the idea of reaching out to the media teacher to ask about collaboration. I met pretty hard resistance.

Anna: No, all of the specialists at my school are all working together. So before we rolled anything out, we all got together to determine a schedule for when we would all post throughout the week so we wouldn't run into scheduling conflicts and so the kids weren't getting too much content on a daily basis and had a nice flow of all the different specials, as well. And then we've put together a 'Specials Unit' on a monthly basis that is for all the specials. It is supplemental to what we are doing individually. So this first one is a 'Specials Bingo' sheet where each square is a different activity and we color coded it so PE is purple and Technology is red, etc., and the first kid who got a 'blackout' put their name into a drawing to have virtual lunch with one of the special's teachers. It's going really well! Some of them are super-goofy, like 'draw a picture with your feet' or 'build a fort' or 'go run for a while'--things to get kids involved, active, and having fun. And for the entire school we are doing a weekly dance party where we record all of us dancing to a playlist that the teachers and students have sent in throughout the week. We compile it and then record a Zoom meeting with all the staff who wants to be a part of it. We all dance to it with the music playing in the background and record it and we send it out to all students who can dance along with us.

Eric: We haven't done any cross-collaboration across contents. But in the Arts, we have 6.5 FTE teachers and so we have all chatted and many of us have invited other teachers in the Art program into our Google Classrooms so they can just pull whatever resources they want and adapt them to their classes. But the nice thing is, all of the Crafts classes--and there are different teachers who teach Crafts--they're all teaching the same lessons we developed this month.

Jake: With our PLCs, there are five of us teaching ELA and we are all supposed to be teaching the same thing but that probably won't sync up for another week. Which I'm kind of dreading; I've been liking that we have freedom and I pushed for my digital storytelling unit. But we will be in lock-step after that. I'm fortunate--they are letting me have a very active role in planning. I'm being included, but I'm dreading when we have to all do the same lesson.

MY: I've been nervous thinking about the employment market for you, but on the other hand you have a lot of skills that are all of a sudden even more marketable in other ways

than what you would have had six weeks ago. What would you want your future employer to know about you?

Jake: I pitched edTech on my resume really hard and I thought that I knew it. And now that I am absolutely head first into it, I'm realizing that I *knew it* but I didn't know it. All that confidence I had is not becoming justified now.

Eric: And you're getting two-thirds participation from your students online?

Jake: Yes, I think it is the nature of the assignments I've been giving. We were lucky--we had planned for this spring to be creative writing time. So the timing just lined up. Now, my students are reading dystopian fiction and writing creative personal pieces. They can navel gaze as much as they want and share their thoughts. So I think the timing worked--I'm not having to teach them how to write a five paragraph essay right now.

Eric: I'm lucky to get one third of students even logging in right now. We passed out Chromebooks, we gave a Chromebook to every two students in the home. But they are still not really buying in. But of the students who are, about half seem to think, "this is interesting" while the others are asking "why do we even have an online version of this class?" So, what I would like my future employer to know is that I'm devoted to my students, I'm committed to being a team player, and just focused on growth for students. I believe in people. I'll show up with strong ideas and strong feelings, and that I'll work hard to be the best version of myself for my students and my coworkers.

Anna: I'd want my future employer to know that I definitely focus on creativity and fun rather than testing in the music classroom, which thankfully isn't a that big of a problem but a lot of times you do run into the weird dichotomy of the core classroom expectations of having an assessment and writing tasks which don't really apply to a music classroom. You can morph that around and make some of those things work but you can't do that every day, which in an elementary core classroom, that is what you're doing. So I would want them to know that my focus is on the student buy-in and not on them turning out good scores. Their retention and the enjoyment of the material is more important to me.

MY: It also seems worth having on our radar the potential for moves to cut music and art and other specials and electives. There have been reports these last few days about how much students are falling behind in math and reading; in the push to get students caught up that doesn't mean they shouldn't have specials or access to electives. We need to make the argument for students to have access to creative outlets--and how it will be

more important than ever for students to have the opportunity to engage creatively as we all recover from this traumatic situation.

Anna: It's crucial, especially for mental health and being able to work both sides of your brain.

MY: I actually feel so hopeful for the future of education after talking with you. The three of you articulated the need for lessons to be learned right now, lessons about equity and access, and lessons about whose voices get heard and who is shut out. As a teacher-educator it fills me with hope for your future students that you will be bringing your passions into your classrooms to build that place. I think we all need a lot of hope right now; thank you so much for providing that today!

Additional Resources:

For more on the factory model of schooling:

McDermott, M. (2013). The corporate model of schooling: How high-stakes testing dehumanizes education. *Counterpoints*, 451, 78-95.

Sleeter, C. (2015). Multicultural education vs. factory model schooling. *Multicultural education: A renewed paradigm of transformation and call to action*, 115-136.

For more on poverty in Oregon schools:

Childhood Poverty Rates in Oregon School Districts

http://media.oregonlive.com/education_impact/other/orpovrates.pdf

National Center for Children in Poverty

http://www.nccp.org/profiles/OR_profile_7.html

Oregon Poverty Map

<https://projects.oregonlive.com/maps/poverty/>