

May 2020

## COVID-19, Equity, and the Future of Education: A Conversation Between Teacher Candidates

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### Recommended Citation

Glenn, Shayna; Kall, Kadee; and Ruebenson, Kate (2020) "COVID-19, Equity, and the Future of Education: A Conversation Between Teacher Candidates," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: [10.15760/nwjte.2020.15.1.1](https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2020.15.1.1)

Available at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte/vol15/iss1/1>

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# COVID-19, Equity, and the Future of Education: A Conversation Between Teacher Candidates

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*When Oregon public schools closed in March 2020 due to COVID-19, Shayna, Kadee, and Kate 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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## **Background**

***Shayna Glenn** is a Teacher Candidate at Portland State University and a student teacher in a middle school Language Arts classroom. She graduated from Kent State University where she studied English and Poetry Writing. In addition, she has worked as a Visiting Poet in middle and elementary schools, inspiring students to write individual and collective poems. She is passionate about social emotional development and providing access to learning for all of her students. Shayna will receive her Masters in Education from Portland State University in June 2020. She has been tending bar in Portland for over a decade.*

***Kadee Kall** is a Teacher Candidate at Portland State University, and a 7th grade health teacher. She received her undergraduate degree in Community Health Education, and will receive her Masters in Education from Portland State University in June 2020. Previously, she worked as an EMT and Nursing Assistant, worked with young people through recreation and outdoor environmental education programs across the country, and as a dance and performing arts instructor for many years. Kadee is a 4th generation Oregonian, and passionate about equity for all students in her community.*

*Kate Ruebenson is a Teacher Candidate at Portland State University. She will receive her Masters in Education from Portland State University in June 2020. Previously, she taught as an Adjunct Professor of English at City University of New York, graduating with an MFA in Poetry from Brooklyn College in 2016. Her work has appeared in Brine Literary, Blakelight Magazine, Roanoke Review, Yellow Chair Review, Typehouse Magazine, and C4 Magazine. Her poem "Crow Goes Hungry" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017. An NYC native, Kate has taught on both coasts and internationally. She is deeply committed to working long term in a school community that values equity and justice for all students.*

## Introduction

**Maika Yeigh (EDITOR):** 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?

**Kate:** One of the things I am struggling with is that I spent much of our fieldwork time in fall and winter terms getting to know these students and trying to deepen connections with them; it feels now like it wasn't nearly enough time. With the effects of COVID-19, so many of them are struggling to do the work and be in touch. There's this fissure in expectations on both ends and it makes the process of student teaching and being a student so much harder.

**Shayna:** I asked for some feedback last week and a lot of the kids said they were overwhelmed by all the work they had to do, which made me wonder if they feel like they have so much more work because they are at home and they have to manage their own time. It made me feel sad for them because we are trying to make their assignments clear, direct, achievable, but any amount of work, really, probably feels overwhelming to a lot of them because they've never had to manage their own time like that.

**Kadee:** Just this week I said to my students, "It's okay to set a timer. I'm only expecting fifteen minutes. If you don't get the assignment done in fifteen minutes, you are allowed to stop. Don't feel like you have to go over on time." I want them to know their best is enough right now.

**MY:** As adults we are the caregivers of the kids and we are very used to our role, but if we aren't taking care of ourselves we aren't going to be able to do it. And we need routines, we all do better with routines--and right now it is difficult to have them, for us and for our students.

**Kate:** When I'm speaking to them, and I'm asking them how they are doing, if they are getting out for a walk, most of my students say that they are spending the majority of their days in their beds, specifically in their beds, and that makes me nervous for many reasons. I think that this change in school structure and daily life is a hard enough adjustment for anyone, let alone those

who already suffer from depression or anxiety. Students now have even more barriers in their way, a host of new anxieties. Many of my students had not been into their kitchens when we spoke and it was around 1:00 in the afternoon. I worry about them, when they say they can't focus and can't concentrate. I am struggling with some of the same feelings in terms of productivity. And that's hard, but then you think about students who might be experiencing homelessness or trying to gain internet access but don't have a computer or there isn't internet access even if they have a computer or they are sharing a bedroom with a bunch of siblings and have no space to work.

**MY:** In thinking about fall, you will be teaching kids who have been out of school for a long time. Let's say we start in September, they have been out of school for five months. Have you thought about fall? And as you start your classes--what kinds of things are you going to be thinking about?

**Kadee:** I have been giving a lot of thought to routines. Consistency is so difficult. I tried to build in routines this winter, but every class period was so different. I'm thinking for fall I should do more research and ask other teachers for input. Routines should be my foundation--lessons are going to change, and students' needs and behaviors are unpredictable, but I want to have a clear vision in my mind so there is no uncertainty on their end. When teachers are uncertain, it feeds into their anxiety.

**Kate:** I also think that creating a sense of classroom trust and community is going to be key coming back in the fall. The beginning of the year will have to be a time to process not just to catch up. I was also thinking about when I was in middle school in NYC, right after 9-11 happened, and what our teachers did at that time. Whether writing poems, or talking in class circles, our teachers did not ignore the spectrum of feelings that we had around the tragedy. And certainly students had such vastly different ways of responding to it. Our teachers wisely created new classroom norms and implemented structure, which was so deeply needed at that time. Students really want structure. I hear from a lot of my students right now that they feel listless without structure. Differentiation, too, is going to be necessary when we return, as students will have had vastly different life experiences during the pandemic.

**MY:** We all know how much better we feel with those routines, and having structure helps kids feel safe. And that's another thing that worries me: How many kids don't feel safe right now because everything around them is so nebulous. Getting back in fall and trying to build routines in the classroom ... they may resist them even though they know they need them. So helping them get into routines as well as how to work with other people again will be important. I think there is going to be a lot of work needed and it won't be just getting through the content.

**Shayna:** Yes, that's what I've been thinking about. School is important because kids need to learn, but it's more than that. It's a community. And, it goes deeper than them just wanting to hang out with their friends. They want to be in school. And I think it is interesting because so

many kids claim to not like school. But school is important because it offers so much to kids; besides the book learning there is the social learning and the collaborative learning. Kadee and I were talking a few weeks ago about how much they are missing by not being at school. Safety. Food. Access to technology. A space that they can do their work in, their own space to think and be. It's upsetting that not all kids have that.

**MY:** And the navigating of relationships. Think about how you learned as an adolescent by trying things with friends--that's how you learn how to be a human in the world. And right now they are not getting that practice.

**Kate:** Exactly - the minutiae of picking up on social cues, walking around the building itself between classes or during lunch time, navigating crowded hallways. That feeling of being recognized by a friend or teacher, making eye-contact with people, fist-bumping, slapping high-fives. For our seniors especially each of those seemingly small physical moments feels like a deep loss.

**Kadee:** I don't know about you, but I have had a couple of students--and by a couple I mean two--who have said that they are really enjoying distance learning. These two have said they are bullied in school and they feel they can now learn and don't have to keep themselves safe at school just to navigate from point A to point B. Of course I don't think that means they should switch to online school forever but I just think there has to be some ways to incorporate some of the things we are doing now in the future. Maybe there are students who only come to school for their core classes and then can do the other classes online. I'm thinking of these two in particular. I can't keep them safe 100% of the time, no matter how hard I try. They are both in my biggest classes. I don't always catch it when students are mean to them. And they are really thriving now, just being able to focus on work and get it done. I hope we can incorporate some of what we learn this spring, creating curriculum during this time, in the future.

**MY:** I think that's really fascinating. How do we keep the good from both models? And what opportunities are there going to be to make changes in the things that haven't been working well in schools in the past?

**Kate:** I hope that we will have had the opportunity to gain further insight into methods of flexibility and forgiveness, something I feel I've honed during this time. Forgiveness in the sense of grading and getting assignments in on time, yes - but also self-forgiveness. A student emailed me, and, while I would normally try to email back within 24 hours, I didn't. Though my initial reaction was one of guilt, I had to let myself be okay with this shift in response time. I think we are practicing forgiveness on both ends--with our students and with ourselves. We are also practicing flexibility in the confrontation of our own expectations.

**Shayna:** The teachers I'm working with have been struggling with that same forgiveness. They are used to providing so much content for their students. They are having a hard time with how

little they can do, but also how much there is to do at the same time. There's frustration. They aren't able to be present for their students the way that they usually are. Our district is doing asynchronous learning so our interactions with students are sort of limited. We only have a few different ways to reach out to kids. So it adds to the feeling of asking, "Are we being effective?" I think teachers are really struggling with the necessary slow down.

**MY:** That seems really hard. Do you think in the fall, school districts will begin by focusing in on the kids and on their social emotional needs? Or are schools going to start the year under the pressure to catch students up on the learning they missed?

**Kate:** What makes me nervous is decisions being made at the district and state levels about what students need in order to graduate or reflect essential skills. I worry that some of these decisions will only further widen the gap in privileges that students have in different school districts.

**MY:** I keep thinking about private schools and how this whole time they have been able to continue and how those students are getting ahead. And when I hear the three of you talking about fall, it is about the kids and their well-being. But we also don't want to disadvantage kids by not providing them learning opportunities. So, in fall, I wonder how we can hold those two things at once--supporting student mental health after this trauma and also focusing on learning.

**Kadee:** It feels like those first two weeks of school we will do whatever our principal asks us to focus on. But then people are going to get into their groove, and if they are naturally somebody who focuses on the social emotional, then that is what they are going to fall into. And if they are someone who is all about content, that's what they will focus on. Making an adjustment in either direction takes so much energy for people who are not fresh out of school like us or who are established. I think it will depend on the administrators in each school. Are they going to push it hard in the beginning? Are they going to play it by ear? Are we going to have buddy teachers, with one who is focused on content and one who is more of a social emotional teacher to hold each other accountable for both needs?

**Shayna:** That's a great idea! We've been discussing in our Methods class how we are seeing that there are those two kinds of teachers, the ones who really care about the learning and the content and the ones who are more concerned about how their students are doing emotionally.

**Kate:** You can also see that when you're looking for jobs, on schools' websites. The mission statement in the "About Us" section says so much about what is valued there. For my students, I am trying to get them to do more creative writing right now in regard to the pandemic, connecting ELA standards with processing trauma.

**Shayna:** Our Assistant Principal said that there has been the most engagement in the Language Arts classes at our school right now. I think that is cool, and it also makes sense because it is very accessible in a way. It's not easy for every student to read or write, but our classes are based

on “tell me how you are feeling” and “what does this make you think?” It’s personal. Whoever you are, however you’re doing, you can do it. There is less assistance needed in a way.

**MY:** When thinking about your future students or your future employer, what would you want them to know?

**Kadee:** When I think of students, I would want them to know--in relation to the pandemic--that we feel like we are going through this by ourselves, but when we come back together it’s going to be really obvious that we didn’t. And if they made it through this spring and this summer and showed up to school in fall, I want them to feel like badasses. They should feel incredibly capable, and strong, and resilient. That doesn’t mean that this is lovely or that they shouldn’t feel stressful emotions. This is hard for all of us. And *we* are so much more set up for this—if for no other reason than age—to handle this and we are all struggling. I want them to know that they are entitled to a little grace and patience from us and from each other and from themselves. For us, I think in every job interview, when they ask, “Talk about a time you were flexible?” we will be able to say that we were teachers during the pandemic. If this were a few years ago, we wouldn’t be in classrooms. So for students: You’re resilient, you’re awesome. And for employers: We can do anything.

**Kate:** Flexibility is the first thing that comes to my mind. We have been flexible in certain ways in our classrooms in the past and throughout the program. But this is a different kind of flexibility, in a solitary sense. We are all experiencing it together, but also very much in isolation. We are enacting flexibility but also reflecting on it almost immediately. In our Methods class, for instance, we have been reading about various grading methods and our own grading philosophies. Thinking about grading in tandem with thinking about how this pandemic is affecting equity is so interesting. So much of what I’ve learned about grading has shifted, which includes the thought process, “Oh, a student didn’t turn in an assignment? That’s maybe not a zero.” And it’s shocking. Because I never thought I would be in this place; for years I was under the impression that if a student doesn’t turn in any work, they receive a zero. But now I’m coming at it from a completely different perspective. We are seeing in real time the implications of traditional kinds of grading and how they are a disservice to our students. Issues of access are so incredibly obvious right now.

**MY:** That’s interesting. And if we took the pandemic out of it, those kids have been struggling with access this whole time. This is now allowing us to see it very clearly. That, in my mind, is the biggest systemic change that needs to come from this experience. If we don’t notice *now* that not every kid has access, then I don’t know if we ever will. This is a call to change those inequities. Thinking about it through grades is a good way to start to fix inequities.

**Kate:** It’s like the veil has been lifted. The students who are failing right now are the students who were failing before. They are now further disenfranchised because of this pandemic.

**Shayna:** I've been thinking about that a lot, too. I feel like the grading I have been doing and the feedback I have been providing to students has been so much more enjoyable for me and easier for me to do because I don't have to attach a letter grade to it. And I feel like a lot of the teachers are wondering, "Why would they do the work? How do I get them to do it?" There's always a conversation about why students would be interested in doing the work if there was no grade attached. But I'm finding that they just want to be a part of the classroom. And so in a way I think they are doing it just so they are participating. And we are not grading in our district because we cannot offer them a controlled environment. So then, what is a classroom environment? And how does it appeal to all students? It doesn't. I've been thinking about the grading issue so much. It's so much better to not assign letter grades ...

**Kate:** It's the feedback. That's the thing many students need, and many want--feedback. As a student, I would rather get written and verbal feedback than just get an A - or an F! - without any feedback.

**Shayna:** Definitely. And we can give more in this format. They are not necessarily doing anything with it. But it's about having that communication. The ones who are interested are using it, and we are having full-blown conversations in Google Classroom about their writing.

**MY:** That is a really interesting take-away. How would you bring that into your classroom next year? What if there were no grades in your class?

**Kate:** Well, in terms of providing structure for our students, what I like about standards grading is it allows us to think about whether the student met the standard or not. Did they exceed? If so, write feedback about how they exceeded. That way we allow deeper understanding in regards to what qualifies as meeting a standard, or not meeting it, or going above and beyond it.

**MY:** I think feedback is important. But then again, I think about teachers who have large numbers of students. How many do you have, Kadee? 240 students?

**KADEE:** 260. I have 260 students.

**MY:** So, you could really never give feedback in the same way.

**Kadee:** It makes me sad, too, because I was doing Flipgrids on Fridays and I initially was going to make a response video to each of them. And I think I made ten, but it took so long. So then I thought I would just send email feedback for each one. And I was writing three or four sentences, and even that took so long and I was just saying, "Thank you for your video. It's great to see your face. I'll see you next week." And, it feels like I am not able to give feedback for students who wanted to engage in that process because I had to check off 200 worksheets. I need a better system.



**Kate:** In this time, it seems like organization and attention to detail are so important. You need to make sure you are checking in with students who don't have access to Google Classroom or who haven't joined after two weeks. You have to make sure you are noticing who is not participating so you can reach out to those students and find out what is going on, potentially providing alternative ways for them to participate. Of course, this mirrors what you would hopefully be doing in a physical classroom: maintaining awareness of who is and is not present, checking in with students who are having trouble with the work or who seem disengaged. It's also becoming more and more obvious that not all students can do the work in the timeframe we have designed. We are used to being able to *see* students who are falling through the cracks or who need extra support. With organization and attention to detail, we can maybe help track those students in this current atmosphere.

**MY:** It's difficult because we all have pretty high expectations for ourselves. And those are hard to meet in this time and atmosphere. We need to be kind to ourselves.

**Kate:** Pedagogically, we read and speak a lot about having high expectations for students. But taking into account student needs, do these come into conflict right now? Can I have high expectations of my students but also take into account that their needs might preclude them from reading or writing or perhaps learning as effectively (and at a similar pace) as they would in the physical classroom, or during a time when the unexpected life changes in a global pandemic aren't an additional concern to already-stressful lives? When I read about having high expectations for students I almost wonder if *expectations* is the right word. I *believe* in my students and I believe they have *capacity*. I can adopt these words with confidence, but *high expectations* seem slightly in conflict with this strange time...

**MY:** In the educational context, the term *expectations* comes from making sure we are not (as teachers) let off the hook from teaching a child. We don't want to say, "I don't expect that child to do this" because they don't have the technology at home or they don't have the tools. Because then it lets all of us off the hook instead of us having to figure out how to provide that child the tools they need so they can be successful.

**Kadee:** I also think it is okay to communicate all of this with our students and let them know, "I want you all to be working to the best of your ability and this is what I hope for and I also want you to know that if something happened this week, I am still going to be here next week."

**MY:** That's so important, right? That students know that even in these uncertain times, their teachers will be there. You will be there, now and when they come back to school. I have to say that I am so inspired by you three and the work you are doing. It is so clear that you care so much about your students and that you know so much about what they need. I feel so *encouraged* and *hopeful* about the future of education knowing how much you care and how prepared you are to teach in these challenging times. Thank you for that.