



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of “Reach. Teach. Talk”. There's something to be said for serendipity. I was going through *Ed Week* last week and I found this opinion piece that really turned my head. And it was an article, it was an opinion that was written by this woman, Brittany Collins, who is speaking about the importance of keeping the SEL central, primary, while we're making this move to remote teaching and learning and how not just it's important for us to do it, but it's possible, and it's also really awesome when it works well, and it's possible to make it work well.

Nat:

For those many, many of us who are looking at this remote learning platform and teaching platform as kind of cold, or technology-based, or I'm missing something here, yes. And there is parts that I think are missing in terms of the move to remote teaching and learning, but there's also perhaps some advantages in some aspects of the remote platform that can actually help us as we include SEL in the remote learning classroom, as we think about our students and work on helping them as they're navigating this new world during the pandemic that brings about its own questions, its own anxieties, its own real kind of exposing the importance of being together, of bonding, of being a connected community.

Nat:

Whether it's the classroom community, the school-to-family community, the one-on-one community, it's all coming back to the forefront here, and in Brittany's article, her opinion piece last week, and again, this is in *Education Week*, it's available online, *Ed Week*, “Yes, you can, you really can do trauma-informed teaching remotely. You really, really can. You really, really should.”

Nat:

I reached out to Brittany Collins out in Western Massachusetts, and I was able to connect with her, and she was willing to come on as a guest for Reach. Teach. Talk. to give all of us some helpful advice, and some helpful tips, and also just overall encouragement about our efforts to connect with our students in this remote teaching and learning platform. So without much further ado, Brittany Collins, thank you so much for being here today.

Brittany Collins:

Thank you so much for having me, Nat. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm excited about the work that you're doing and the opportunity to advance trauma-informed and SEL pedagogies online.

Brittany Collins:

As you mentioned, I'm the teaching and learning coordinator at Write the World, which is an organization that supports online writing for teens ages 13 through 19 around the world. We have about 50 thousand members in over 110 countries. We started out of Harvard University's Advanced

Leadership Initiative about five years ago, and we support extracurricular programming as well as teachers who are looking to support writing across the curriculum using digital technologies. And so these themes of writing and storytelling in SEL are what I'm dealing with every day, but they feel like they have heightened importance in this time of the pandemic, so I'm excited to talk about that with you.

Nat:

I'm very curious about this focus on writing and its important when you're creating a stronger SEL-driven classroom, remote or not.

Brittany Collins:

Yeah. So when we're thinking about trauma, or adversity, or emotional development overall, even not in a trauma context, the process of putting our lived experiences and our thoughts and feelings into a narrative arc has been proven psychologically to be incredibly advantageous from an intellectual and an emotional standpoint.

Brittany Collins:

And of course stories overall are fun and enjoyable to read, and they give meaning to both writer and reader, but the process itself, even if it's not public, just privately having students put down their thoughts, and feelings, and reactions to a text, or their lived experience in this time, is something that really promotes learning and promotes emotional wellbeing for everybody involved.

Brittany Collins:

There's a number of researchers that have been studying teaching as storytelling. So Kieran Egan is someone who comes to mind as a leading educational theorist that has a book called *Teaching as Story Telling* and focuses on this idea that all learning happens through narratives, that we're storytelling animals, and that humans are unique because we are the species that can tell stories to process our experiences, and integrate them, and move forward, and learn from them.

Brittany Collins:

There are also studies from Paul Zak and others focusing on the ways in which stories foster empathy neurologically. So the brain produces something called oxytocin when we read or listen to a story, and oxytocin is the neurochemical that creates connection. And so stories then become catalysts for empathy, and then that empathy catalyzes action. So sharing stories really is, I think it can feel like soft skills, but really it's stories that drive change in lives, and in communities, at scale.

Nat:

As you mentioned, it's stories that historically have brought people together, communities, tribes, nations, these sharing myths. Right?

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

Right? That teach lessons of how to live.

Brittany Collins:

COVID-19 is manifesting differently for all of us depending on our geography, and our family, and the contexts that we find ourselves in, but we're all connected in some way through this crisis. And so I think that's powerful in terms of a teaching opportunity because we can model for young people how we respond to crisis. And that's no small task, right? I mean we as adults, especially in Western society, are not very good at talking about challenging topics, and emotions, and loss, and grief, and the realities that are manifesting in every moment of every day right now. And to do so in the moment is even harder than it is to do so reflectively.

Brittany Collins:

If we're teaching about a crisis in history, if we're talking about something that happened a year ago, we have some distance. But to be able to come into an educative moment from a place of authenticity and rawness and be able to say that I'm impacted by this and that's okay, and we all are impacted by this, and we can get through this together, the only way that we're going to teach young people to be candid and open about having and processing emotions, and learning through those, and using them as catalysts for learning, is by being I'm going to use the word with calibrated vulnerability.

Brittany Collins:

I'm not saying that teachers should come in and unleash all of their emotions on their students, or depend or burden their students in any way with these emotions. However, being honest, naming emotion words, and just opening conversations through their vulnerability makes it okay for students to be vulnerable as well in this time.

Nat:

It makes it okay. It's okay. Not necessarily it's going to be okay, which is a message that we do also want to communicate, but not in a contrived way, right?

Brittany Collins:

Sure.

Nat:

But it's okay. What you're feeling is okay. Sometimes, many times, I'm thinking about younger students especially who might not have the vocabulary-

Brittany Collins:

That's another thing.

Nat:

... to identify what they're feeling. What would we do with students who are younger? Does the writing process help them to kind of circle into, "Ah, this is what I'm feeling," and is that helpful?

Brittany Collins:

I think that it does. I think that writing at any age is helpful. Of course with younger students, you have to be much more careful about how you're framing it. With teenagers, you can frame a direct writing assignment about the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that has a lens of unity, or solidarity, or resilience, so that you're supporting positive emotions through reflection.

Brittany Collins:

With younger students, of course you have to be much more scaffolded if you're going to open conversations. I think that with younger students, they might be experiencing emotions that they don't have the developmental ability to name or recognize. That might manifest in behavioral challenges, anger, sadness, outbursts. They of course don't know why they're feeling and acting in these ways, but they can sense and pick up on the emotions that the adults around them have, even if they're four or five years old.

Brittany Collins:

I have a friend who has a toddler, who is not even in preschool yet and doesn't obviously understand what this all means, but knows that she can't see her friends anymore, and knows that she's not going to daycare. I think it's different for every family how they choose to word the narratives that they are telling their children about this time, but I think across the board it's important that we make space for making those emotions and outbursts okay. Right? If little kids are coming to us and they're acting in this way, we can talk them through their emotions and ask them what's going on for them, but in a way that's calibrated, of course, developmentally.

Nat:

I'm thinking about your opinion piece from last week. You made some very, very I think excellent strategic points for teachers on how to maintain and even capitalize on this period of time in their classrooms.

Brittany Collins:

The creating in your online learning environment a sense of safety, and connection, and promoting students' emotional regulation, whether that's through naming emotions and practicing by modeling how to experience and process emotion, or whether it's through mindfulness activities that promote breathing, relaxing, taking time out of content-based curricula to practice these kinds of self-care tools and equip students with small exercises that they can then do on their own, all of these kinds of steps create a trauma-informed learning environment.

Brittany Collins:

I think that remote learning brings to mind a lot of isolating images. Obviously, we're doing synchronous and asynchronous pedagogies. We're not in a classroom together with students. However, I would push back against that to say that the connection is different, but we can be connected, and even more connected, in our online learning environments and that those senses of connection is really what buoys young people in times of adversity.

Brittany Collins:

I would also say that establishing a sense of routine is something that's incredibly important and relatively tactile and accessible for educators in terms of applying this trauma-informed lens. We know that young people, and everyone, adults included, when they're experiencing stress, they're feeling like everything is out of control, so it's anything that reintegrates a sense of control that can help combat stress and trauma, so something as simple as knowing okay, every day at 3:00 P.M. is when I log on and I do my reading assignments with my reading group. And maybe I'm on a message board, or maybe I'm skypeing, but this is the time of day and the day each week that I'm doing that activity. Every Friday, I'm going to check in with my teacher in the morning, and we're going to have a conversation, and maybe it's about content knowledge, maybe it's not. Maybe it's just a check-in about where we're at right now and how we're feeling.

Brittany Collins:

Knowing what to expect even though it seems small in the scope of all of these larger questions about education really helps to imbue the online learning experience with a sense of control, and expectation, and structure that might be subconscious, students might not sit there and think, "Gee, I'm really glad I know what's coming up tomorrow," but it's something that maintains this feeling of knowing what to expect. Which if you think about the school day, when we're in school and interacting synchronously with our teachers, we know how the day is going to go. We have the blocks from 8:30 to 3:00 P.M., everything is very structured and rigid, so translating that as much as we can online I think is helpful for a sense of continuity and control.

Nat:

For sure. I love that. I love the idea of stability that comes with routine, that comes with repetition, and also that comes with I'm still here. I'm still here. You're going to see me every day at 8:00, 10:00, whatnot, even if it's an asynchronous kind of format where, as a primary elementary school teacher, you're filming yourself reading a story or something, and the kids know that every day at 10:00 in the morning they hear, or an assembly. Every day we're going to have our assembly and we can all check in from wherever we are.

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

Right? All of that being so important, and I'm thinking about stories now too because, in a sense, I'm thinking about the way we start the day during this period of time matters and how stories can factor in perhaps. How are you today? Where are you today?

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

You're in here. Right?

Brittany Collins:

Right, right, and even show-and-tell. Think about something small like show-and-tell in schools. That is a form of storytelling, that you're bringing a piece of your identity into class and talking about the story behind it. That's something that can absolutely translate to remote learning context and that allows for storytelling at every age.

Brittany Collins:

I saw a school around here has been doing something through social media where they had show us your socks day. So it's nothing weighty, it's some levity in this time, but all the little kids are taking pictures of their sock with monkeys on it, and their sock with bananas on it, and that's a way of fostering these feelings of connection and humor in a time when we all need that. And it's something that keeps the kids private. That was also a good part of it, is it's a photo that we can share in community in a way that's relatively anonymous. It doesn't put a lot of pressure on families to contribute.

Nat:

With so many school districts putting the focus off of grades, actually declaring no new content, no new curriculum, because, as you pointed out rightfully, there's an equity issue here.

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

Not everybody's going to have access to a hotspot or to even the technology, so districts are being conservative, I think rightfully, in saying, "We can't move forward when not everybody can come forward with us."

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

So all that to say perhaps we're in a period also where we can focus on everything you and I are talking about, the SEL component, the stability equals security component, the writing and creativity and expression in being human and the comfort in not knowing part. Does that make sense?

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely, and I would argue that those are the skills that matter most sending young people out into an uncertain world and preparing them for success. We need these emotional skills as much as we need content-based knowledge, and it is critical at this time.

Brittany Collins:

There's an article in *Inside Higher Ed* by Deborah Cohen called "What Do We Need to Teach Now?" and it's all about this idea of what message am I sending if I'm pushing content knowledge, and not being honest about how this is impacting me, and expecting my kids to just push forward and take quizzes and tests? And there's a missed opportunity for us all to connect as equals and as human beings that are all united by this challenging time.

Nat:

But it sounds like you'd advocate actually to try to relinquish a little bit of control. If we're really hitting on the imperfection, don't make perfection be the enemy of the good. Be authentic, be true, but also by being true and authentic expressing in a way that we're all uncertain during this time, but I can offer you this.

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely. I can offer you presence. I think that's huge. I can be there for you. And along with that, it's so important for teachers to also protect their own emotional well-being in this time. However, yes, how do you show up for students? And how can we learn together in community, but maybe it's learning in a way that looks different than the classroom?

Brittany Collins:

Maybe we're not logging on to talk in a circle every day about how we're feeling. Life also needs to move on. We still need to be productive, even in times of challenge. And challenge, I think, can be a generative force for intellectual growth, and engagement, and storytelling, absolutely. We might find new ways of investing in curricular content through a lens that we didn't consider prior to this time.

Brittany Collins:

So it's not to say that real, true, authentic academic engagements can't or shouldn't happen, but how do we find symmetry between a depth of intellectual engagement and emotional engagement, and how do we do that in a way that, as you said, is releasing control to some extent? How can healing happen through a release of control?

Brittany Collins:

I think that there's absolutely this unconscious impulse in all of us to control what we can through work, through life. What are the small details here that we have control over? And so it's natural for teachers to feel stressed about making their online learning environment the best that it can be, but being the best that it can be is often not through those control mechanisms, if that makes sense.

Nat:

It makes total sense, and I really appreciate also you're reminding me and the audience here that when we're talking about focusing on social-emotional learning, and when we're talking about restoring a sense of emotional balance and stability, when we're talking about trauma-informed teaching, we're not throwing out the challenge that comes with learning.

Nat:

Oftentimes, I find myself talking with teachers about how learning is never passive, actually. If you're truly moving toward long-term retention, that comes through challenge, that comes through obstacles, in surmounting them, right?

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

Right? So it's not like throwing the baby out with the bath water, no curriculum, let's just tell stories for colorful texturizing stories today, but really, there's an importance to the cognitive work that we're doing together as well.

Brittany Collins:

Yes. And from a trauma standpoint, studies show that that's also necessary in the way that routine is for young people in times of crisis, that they need to know and they need to sense from mentors and teachers that even in challenging times, life does go on. And so I think that thinking about how learning is a mechanism for life going on, and for integrating and processing our experiences, and using that, being productive in this time can feel more meaningful than ever, and so absolutely, again, finding that balance between emotional support and intellectual engagement.

Nat:

Emotional support, intellectual engagement through storytelling, stability, sensitivity, right?

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely.

Nat:

And this discussion today has just been so eye-opening for me about the power we have as teachers even when we're not sharing space together. And the power, and I don't mean control, I don't mean

power like superpower, I mean we are those adults that these kids, that our students are looking toward for so much.

Nat:

And maybe we can wrap up our conversation with some discussion about social-emotional teaching. Maybe you might have a couple of bullet points that teachers can consider to help their own selves as they're giving so much at this time.

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely. Yeah, I mean I think that that's probably the most important element of social-emotional learning pedagogy. When we talk about this kind of teaching, we are not saying that teachers should become school counselors, or that they have the same skillset or should have the same responsibility, that the onus of supporting real psychological challenges that manifest in this time, that isn't something that should be on teachers' shoulders.

Brittany Collins:

But moving from a lens of fixing to supporting I think is a viewpoint that can help teachers feel like they don't have to bear the burden of being sole witness to students' adversity and challenges in this time. It's a little bit cliché, this whole fill your cup first kind of message, but it's so true that if we're not taking care of our own emotional regulation, and we're all stressed in this time, if we're not processing and dealing with that on our own in a way that is beneficial and regulatory to us, then there's no way that we can help promote that in students.

Brittany Collins:

And it's really easy ... You mentioned the equity issues that are manifesting right now, and I was just reading an article about the students who just haven't shown up to any online learning classes, and any attempt for teachers to reach out to families has gone unsuccessful, and that's so stressful in the backdrop of a pandemic that's already stressful. And so-

Nat:

Sorry. Stressful on the teacher, because that teacher is feeling concerning and worried about those individual students that they can't, they've gone AWOL. Where are they?

Brittany Collins:

Right. And you know these people as individuals, you've built relationships with them throughout the year, and that only intensifies that kind of stress. And there is a term, secondary traumatic stress, sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue, that can happen in individuals who are routinely exposed to others' traumas. Therapists, teachers are absolutely in that category.

Brittany Collins:

When you're receiving challenging stories and you can't do anything to change the source of stress, the circumstances that are causing young people pain, that's something that can become very disturbing for oneself. And so it's crucial to realize again that you are one part of a constellation of support, that the onus is not on your shoulders as teacher to "take students home with you." I use that proverbially, but you cannot fix everybody's problems.

Brittany Collins:



Instead, how can you support the social emotional wellness of all young people coming to learn in your space, in your community, in a way that maintains those healthy boundaries but also catalyzes social emotional growth for them? It's a delicate balance. It's easy to sit here and talk about, it's hard to do in practice, but definitely maintaining your own sense of routine. What are regulatory practices for you? Do you meditate? Do you run? What, outside of work, can you do and who can you talk to to get a sense of relief and release for yourself? And then how can you also model those kinds of regulatory practices for students and just bring into conversation these ideas of how we take care of ourselves emotionally and socially?

Nat:

Even the idea of asking your students, "Who do you count on? Do you have somebody, a friend, who you can go to to build a bond?"

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely, and making connections, facilitating peer-to-peer connections, facilitating connections between colleagues and students, of course counselors and therapists, where appropriate, and students. Just being the facilitator for that kind of constellation is the image that I come back to, is huge, and it takes the onus off of your being the one person bearing witness to this hard time.

Nat:

I found myself over the past couple of weeks acknowledging that I've always, and this is not a new idea, but the idea that teaching is actually, ironically, is a very isolating profession, and our classrooms are oftentimes silos. And those great eureka moments where like, "Oh my gosh, I had the kids just up to level 11, but only I know this, or I and my students know this, but I wish that there was some other adult who saw this," I'm in my silo. And it's almost like that, in a sense, is compounded at this time, because not only do teachers generally feel this way, like this is my world here and my classroom, but now I'm remote.

Nat:

And that's what I wanted to get back to is this idea of the term remote learning and remote teaching as compounding this feeling of isolation. You just offered some wonderful ways for teachers to try to face that and work with that, but as some final words, is there anything that you would like to share about just finally what teachers can do to not feel alone, and siloed, and remote?

Brittany Collins:

Yeah, I mean I think that finding ways to still connect with professional communities, whatever that looks like for them, whether it's colleagues, maybe it's friends, maybe it's an online professional development community, maintaining that sort of connection, again this idea that we keep coming back to, is just as important for educators as it is for students. And that means connecting with other educators, not only with your students, and having discussions about practice and pedagogy in this time to compare notes. And that could easily become a perfectionistic competition, and that's not what I mean, but how do we process our own emotions, and feedback that we're getting, and challenges that we're having, with our colleagues?

Nat:

Very good. I've always said, when I was a teacher, I always jokes about how I've got my friends and I've got my teacher friends.

Brittany Collins:

Yeah, the conversations are different.

Nat:

Right? They're totally a different conversation. I'm investing 90% of my time right now with my teacher friends for all the reasons you cited and all the resources and help that they can give me during this time, and then obviously connecting with my friends in ways that only they who know me so well can help me with.

Brittany Collins:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Nat:

Brittany Collins, this has been a wonderful conversation and hope-filled.

Brittany Collins:

Thank you so much. Thank you.

Nat:

Thank you so much.