

Evan Schneider:

Hi Elizabeth, how are you?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Hi Evan, I'm great. Thank you so much for having me.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, thanks so much for being on. I'm going to go ahead and start by asking you to talk a little bit about your journey to your current work. How did you get where you are and what sustains you kind of on a daily basis in that work?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Quite admittedly, I didn't originally envision that I would enter the field of dance education. When I started my studies at Rutgers University, I entered as a dance performance major. It really wasn't until I met my now mentor, Dr. Barbara Bashaw, during her launch of the graduate education program at Rutgers. So that offered me a five-year pathway to earn both my bachelor of fine arts in dance and also my EDM in dance education.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Through her coursework, I was really kind of engrossed with the investigation of dance pedagogy as kind of a vehicle for me to analyze and dissect the power structures and elements of dance that I didn't necessarily enjoy. I've just really enjoyed learning the practice of teaching. It's incredibly humbling, just like the art form of dance.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

That led me to my work calling. Most significantly, I've worked at Trenton Central High School for six years now. I founded the dance program there. So I do feel honored to learn with my students. They really have taught me a majority of what I know to be true as a teacher. It's really an honor to learn with them. It's been just a journey to found that program and to shape it and watch it grow, and to now be a valued member of our school community.

Evan Schneider:

It sounds like a really great place to work. We talked to Andy Seabert too. He really loves it there as well.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yes. Yeah, I'm surrounded by incredible colleagues, both within the arts department and just our high school and our district as well.

Evan Schneider:

I asked Andy this too, but how has Princeton and the Pace Center partnered with your work at Trenton Central High, and what have been the most successful ways that volunteers have partnered with you?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yeah. I feel incredibly lucky, because essentially, this partnership has sort of fallen into my lap through Lou Chen, who is the program manager for arts outreach. He came to me with a proposal in the fall, that he could devote a fellow to support the dance program.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Lou, during I believe his time as a student, had a partnership with our long-standing orchestra at Trenton Central High School, and was looking to expand that work to all four arts disciplines, which I'm incredibly thankful for dance being one of them. This year, we've launched Trenton Youth Dancers. Our Princeton fellow is Sophie Blue. I believe she's a junior. She has really also been instrumental in shaping what that program looks like.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Sort of in my initial ask when I was planning with Lou, I said, "A gap that I'm really always thinking about filling is just access to dance education." It really hurts me when students come to me in the high school and have not had access to study dance before their 10th grade year, because it's just not available within the public school or in an affordable manner through different community partners. So my ask was to say, "Can we do something outside of the school day and expand the school week?" That led to the launch of Trenton Youth Dancers, which is a Saturday program where the students are bused from the Trenton area to Princeton. They take class with one of the different student dance companies each week.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I really credit Sophie in helping build that model to incorporate the diversity of student groups. I think it's really helped broaden the definition of what dance is for my students, and just that they love that true interaction between current Princeton students, and that there's so much variety each week.

Evan Schneider:

I want to move into a little bit about the current situation, and the COVID-19 crisis, and what effect that's having on how you teach your pedagogy, how you teach, and things like that. What do you feel like is the most important thing that you'd like people to know about the crisis right now from your perspective and specifically from the perspective of education and pedagogy?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Sure. I think it's really important for us all to acknowledge for our students and maybe most particularly for our high school students, that they're really mourning the loss of community. And that school is a really important place for social development, not just academic development.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I think, yeah, there's just a true amount of sadness as students are starting to face that they may be missing out on their prom and their graduation. I think developmentally that's really important to remember, because these are milestones. These are things, as a community, that we place so much value in.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I think especially for my students, many of them are the first to graduate high school and go on to college from their families. So this is a very crucial time. There's just a lot of sadness from both being away from school and the uncertainty in the future.

Evan Schneider:

Have you been able to find ways to support students who are experiencing that sadness and that lack of community?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yeah, I think that answer's evolving. Even from developing our lessons early on when we thought, "Hey, maybe we would be out of school for two weeks to a month," to realizing this is probably a long-term reality. Trying to shape lessons that encourage more social interaction.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I can talk a little bit about fun platforms that we've been trying to use to develop those community events. Also, specifically in terms of dance, our students were supposed to produce a show on April 24th, which the Trenton Youth Dance program was also going to be featured. So we're trying to build some celebration events around that.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, I feel like you guys maybe could teach us a thing or two. The Pace Center, we also... We aren't in the work of teaching in the classroom, but we do offer a lot of trainings and things like that. But more importantly, I think we offer a place for students to find community and service. Replacing that, it's just really, really hard.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Right. It's not the same. It will not be the same as being in person together. But I think that's really important to acknowledge about how we are bringing our students together to socialize and to be with one another during this time.

Evan Schneider:

Just thinking about some of the struggles that the students are having, I kind of want to ask you about how you think about youth development theory and what does that look like in practice right now? And how has or will the conversation about this topic shift in light of the current crisis?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yeah, so I think for me, youth development theory also really aligns currently with the social emotional competencies that we're trying to instill in students. That's self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness. I think the arts in a way are already really aligned to support building those competencies in the way that we share leadership, exchange ideas, initiate, investigate problems. I think art and dance making is a really essential part of that.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I've just launched with my dance two class, a dance and social justice unit. I'm envisioning that this will be a way for students to speak as choreographers about some of the current realities.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I think in the past, the Trenton Youth Dancers program is also a really great model of youth development. Having Sophie and the students at Princeton be strong mentors for our kids. Also, hopefully in the future, bringing some of our Trenton alumni back to participate as coaches in that program.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Something that this crisis has also brought up is just thinking about the way that we are ensuring that we are meeting the basic needs of our students. There's certainly a gap there, because we know that schools are much more than four walls. They're social service centers, they're community centers for our students. I think there's promise in seeing how we're starting to address those gaps, but there's still so much unknown as well.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, so getting back to some of the issues around remote schooling, are there particular policies or structures that you think have been helpful and useful as you have made this transition? Also, what are the limiting factors that you're seeing your students experience?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Right. I think during this current crisis, we have really amplified some of the gaps that are already there. I'm specifically thinking about the digital divide for our students. It looks very different for our district to move to remote instruction versus some of the other school districts in New Jersey or even for university students.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I'm really happy and pleased to see that our district has now moved to purchase Chromebooks for students who need them. That's only solving a piece of the problem. The next is internet access. But I'm happy to see that change happen relatively quickly. I think it also demonstrates that that's maybe something we should have been thinking about all along, to have one-to-one technology for our students.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

There are still a lot of unknowns about kind of how students are getting fed and how they are feeling and coping with social and emotional issues. I'm happy to see that the district and our community partners are making strategic plans on how to distribute food and care items to different wards of our city. I think that's also promising.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

But on more of a personal level, I also struggle with the balance between holding firm expectations about instruction with my students, but also being nurturing enough to empower students to express when they are experiencing difficulties, whatever they may be. I know from working with my population, that they're potentially shy in expressing those things. That's been on my mind very much so during this time.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, I'm sure offering that encouragement can be very personalized in terms of what each specific student is experiencing. But I was just curious, is there anything that you find sort of generally applicable and helpful for students? Or also thinking about parents all of a sudden becoming co-teachers along with you. What are you saying to them?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yeah, so I also feel like my approach to this has been to use our social media platforms to interact with parents and students. We have a relatively active Instagram page. Through that, I've been trying to just post some tips for students. As one of my colleagues has renamed it, zips, since my last name starts with a Z.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I'm not a master in any of this, but trying to set up structures for students about how to schedule out their time, about the importance of taking time in your day to care for yourself, to hydrate, to feed yourself. Also, negotiating the demand that many of our students are caretakers for family members, for younger siblings. Trying to help them determine how to set a plan for the day, how to prioritize, how to goal set, because many of them are managing and sharing devices or being co-teachers for younger siblings. So the need is great, but thinking about just how to model some of those decision-making processes.

Evan Schneider:

We're not sure how long all of this is going to be happening, but just kind of maybe thinking ahead a little bit to what you could imagine a post-COVID-19 world might look like, what do you envision will be different and what do you hope people will learn from a crisis like this?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yeah, I think there are still many concerns in a post-COVID world. Thinking about what does that mean as we gradually return to the classroom. Specifically those implications for a dance classroom, where there is physical participation, where there is touch involved, and how that may have to shift in instruction.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Also, that there will be inevitably gaps in instruction. I think my main goals right now for my students are to ensure that they are physically and emotionally safe, and that they still feel that they are a member of a community. So while we're in this period of distance learning, thinking about how teachers can assess and anticipate those instructional gaps, but know that we'll get back to that in the fall.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I think what's potentially promising or what I've just been noticing in my own teaching is thinking about how we can use kind of this blended learning model when we return back to the classroom, especially thinking that sometimes there are students who have to be on long-term absences or leaves, and how things can be recorded, be filmed, be shared, of course with the proper safety and consent procedures. But thinking about how it's really possible to record any live lesson or use this flip classroom model. I think that's potentially empowering, knowing that I'm developing some of those materials already right now.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I think that'll ultimately support learning once we return. And just the practice of chunking and making things smaller and very clear for students, that that will help facilitate in processing learning.

Evan Schneider:

I like to end these interviews with an opportunity for our guests to share a little bit of hope. There's always something going on in everyone's lives, that if you take a little time to appreciate it, it can make a big impact on how your emotional health and well-being is doing. What's bringing you hope right now?

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

A couple things. I think in watching the educational landscape shift so quickly into distance learning, distance instruction, and to see the mass development of resources through community partnerships and professional organizations. A few that I'd like to highlight, because I think they've supported some of the work that I've talked about earlier today, in terms of dance, the organization, Arts Ed Now, in addressing how teachers can support social emotional learning. And both Dance New Jersey and the National Dance Organization have really been instrumental for me as a dance educator in just feeling like I have a community of resources to support my work.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I'm really quite excited just to see my students' eagerness in still trying to participate. Just yesterday, they had a dance making assignment where they participated in a challenge from Dance New Jersey, where they had to create a piece based on somewhere they'd like to go after quarantine. Just seeing them dance and be physically expressive I think is really exciting.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I've also, while it seems kind of silly and trivial still to me, have been exploring the platform of TikTok. This started as kind of a challenge for our school's virtual spirit week. But I think as a platform, it's both really interesting in terms of dance and the type of dance gestures, and kind of speed that's happening in those movement life there. But also, as a platform for learning and repetition. It kind of, for me, makes me think about flow and how that incorporates that.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

I've been having fun embarrassing myself and learning along with my students on that. I think there's some implications to use that as a teaching or a review tool.

Evan Schneider:

Great. Thank you so much. Elizabeth, it's been a real pleasure getting to know you a little bit and getting to talk to you. Thank you so much for coming on.

Elizabeth Zwierzynski:

Yes, it's been a pleasure to talk to you as well, and thank you.