

Talking Teaching: Season 03 Episode 02 Transcript

Joe

Hello, I'm Joe.

Genevieve

And I'm Genevieve Costigan.

Joe

Welcome to talking teaching.

Luke

It's been a very eye opening experience and it also shows just how adaptable our system really is and how quickly we can change and meet the needs of everybody.

Julie

How do you do AFL coaching, we had to be really creative around all those sorts of things.

Janet

Between 20 to 30%, that have at least one characteristics that could consider them as being vulnerable.

Genevieve

On this episode of talking teaching, we'll be speaking with school leaders about the rapid transition to online teaching and learning. What worked, what didn't and what they'll be taking into the future.

Joe

Plus, we'll explore the potential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable students, and what factors put the most at risk.

Genevieve

But first, in the days leading up to the return of students and teachers to schools around Australia. Joe sat down with Luke Cripps, the Assistant Principal of Newlands primary school. Situated in Melbournes inner north, the school is bilingual with about 260 students and as Joe discovered it made itself as flexible as possible for parents and teachers during the transition to remote learning.

Joe

Luke Crips is the Assistant Principal of New Orleans Primary School in Melvin's north and he joins us now on the talking teaching podcast Luke, welcome.

Luke

Thank you so much, Joe. It's a pleasure to be here.

Joe

For those who are unfamiliar with the school. Tell us a little bit about what the school is like now and essentially how it sort of changed over the last 5-10 years.

Luke

I suppose it started back in the 1950s. It was when we first opened there was a Kodak factory. Obviously that's closed down and the school has become a lot smaller in growth but now as it becomes a gentrified area, a lot of people are moving from Brunswick and moving into the Preston area the numbers are starting to grow again.

Joe

Coming to February, March this year and all of a sudden the world basically turned itself upside down with the pandemic of COVID-19, so how's the school coped with that rapid transition to online teaching online learning?

Luke

I think as a whole system, I think it's been unbelievable. I think the department has been really clear in their communication, they allowed a lot of time for schools to get themselves really organized and prepared.

Joe

What's the impact been on the teachers of the school?

Luke

The way that we've gone about our remote learning strategy was to try and make it as consistent as possible to what was happening at school. So our planning structures are still very similar. So for the teachers, it was videoing their mini lessons or putting up learning experiences that were catering to the different needs of the cohorts. You know, at the start of our remote learning strategy or our journey. We we had teachers giving audio and written feedback on every single learning experience and that was taking its toll on teachers. There's no doubt around their dedication, but they were being overworked and their well being was definitely being impacted. With our remote learning strategy really allowed for the teachers and the community and for leadership to really refine to make sure that we could make the relevant adjustments to ensure that everyone was feeling safe and supportive throughout the process.

Joe

In terms of developing a strategy, did you have a strategy there effectively ready to go? or did you have to use what you already had and then come up with a strategy and then push that out to parents?

Luke

When we were looking through different at the, at the idea or the concept of remote learning was really looking through lenses and what we wanted to do is ensure that we could utilize some of the processes and familiar platforms that were already at our school and then trying to have this really systematic process which would upskill not only parents, but also allow students to really help parents gauge an understanding of what they are being used for and why.

Joe

You're a school that also has composite classes as well, has that thrown up any additional challenges in the way you've had to go to online teaching?

Luke

I suppose it has to a degree in relation to being able to individualize in the 4-6 area, a lot of our platforms really allowed for us to transition really easily across. With the prep ones, we've had to do, I suppose different types of learning, but what we know is that students are at varying levels so we always need to really adapt to meet the needs and I think that's one of the things that we've tried to get across to parents is that here is our mini lesson, this is our This is our learning experienc, you can adapt it how you would like as well.

Joe

Anecdotally, you hear a lot about working parents who are working from home and having to look after their children and those sorts of things. So how is that sort of experience sort of come back in terms of the feedback that you've been getting and the work that's being applied from school?

Luke

When we started to create a remote learning strategy we were trying to look through it through different lenses and I think one of the things was around, you know, there's some families that have one parent is there's ones with two parents, there's you know, different students, sorry, parents are working at different times, Students might not be able to have support with their learning until six or seven o'clock at night. So we really tried to make sure that that was really flexible when we were listening to the feedback that we're receiving from parents to ensure that you know that we could support our students as much as we possibly could.

Joe

And speaking of the students, what's been the feedback that you've been getting from the students who have been at home, whether it's to their parents or directly, I've been enjoying the experience?

Luke

Yeah, I think at the start, there was an initial excitement, you know, when anything's new everything's really exciting and I think it was really up to us to just ensure that we could make those learning experiences really engaging and I suppose that's one of the limitations, was how do we ensure that we can engage the students because it's limited in the capacity of what we can do. The students have been absolutely resilient throughout this whole process. But I know that while they have enjoyed it, I know that they're really excited about getting back to school and seeing their friends and some normality to take place within the schooling environment.

Joe

So an interim report from the The Melbourne Graduate School of Education, which is looked into the impacts of online teaching online learning during this period has found that there's been significant opportunities and many challenges associated with this transition. So what have been some of the positives you found?

Luke

From a colleague point of view, there's been a lot of different conversations that have taken place. Sharing their ideas, sharing policy, sharing resources, sharing stories. One that really sticks out in my mind was when one of one of my friends started taking, sorry, one of my colleagues was sharing was conducting their first video conference session and one of the students you could tell it just woken up, you could see his bed, you know, and from there that was like, oh, okay, well, we need to start thinking about some of the guidelines and procedures around what a safe space looks like at home and you know, what is it what is a good learning environment like the home as well.

Joe

One of the key issues that has been identified during this pandemic is around equity and not all students have access to the same technology, the same levels of support. So as an issue how's Newlands Primary School dealt with that?

Luke

Well, we have an a one to one iPad program, or device program, in our four to six area. So that was really covered. In the two to three area, we're moving towards a one to one device program. So a lot of our families in that area had that as well. In our prep to one area, they we did do a lot of lending out of devices. In relation to dongles and things like that, it was very limited, it was probably about six or seven families. Because we have been really deliberate in in calling families throughout this process and just making sure that they're feeling supported with we've kind of been on top of on top of that.

Joe

Some of the public image around schools in this space has been a mad scramble to get this . This isn't the experience that you've been telling us so how is Newlands primary school, you know, well prepared for this?

Luke

School has a strong focus around ICT and we understand the importance that it is for a 21st century learner. We were using two major platforms at our school prior, which was being utilized in the classroom on a daily basis. So for us, it was really about amplifying the platforms that we were currently using and then communicating that really effectively to the parents.

Joe

Is there anything that you're going to take out of this remote teaching online experience into the future?

Luke

That's, that's our big inquiry, question of the moment, is you know, how do we really capitalize on a lot of the positives and I think the big one is around parent engagement. Our parents are so engaged in their students learning they now have a real strong understanding of where their students at, they have a real strong authentic working relationship with the teaching now, so they talking on a level around student learning, which is really fantastic. So for us, it's really about how do we continue to build upon that. It's been a very eye opening experience and it also shows just how fantastic our teachers and how adaptable our system really is and how quickly we can change and meet the needs of everybody. You seem to indicate that through this process, there's been a strengthening of community, particularly between the relationship between teachers and parents and teachers and guardians and that sort of thing. Am I correct in saying that? Yeah, absolutely. From a staff point of view, there's been this band of staff, and I suppose a degree to towards leadership, where I think we have a common enemy around the Coronavirus, or COVID-19, and I think that's been really fantastic for staff morale and from a from a parent point of view, they have a lot of groups where they're communicating with each other and that is supported by some of the school's platforms as well.

Joe

In terms of looking into the future and the way Online Teaching and Learning has transformed this space. I mean, what are the some of the areas that you're looking at this might be able to go into. I mean, realistically a parent teacher interview something that likely to be conducted remotely now?

Luke

Yeah, I think that's definitely one of the one of the options and one of the things that our school is looking at is, you know, currently we have a whole, you know, we have an altered program and a whole day to have parents come in and out, where now we can just just do it online. We can share work, share, you know, goals and we're even thinking about starting to film all of our lessons, you know, and giving our students who may have missed the step, they can then just go straight back onto the computer and you know, relook at it.

Joe

Well, look, it's been a fascinating insight into how Newlands Primary School has gone about dealing with the rapid transition to remote learning during COVID-19. I want to sincerely thank you for your for your time and for your knowledge on the talking teaching podcast.

Luke

No problems. Thank you.

Genevieve

Newlands primary school system principal look groups on how his school handled remote learning. But how did the experience differ for secondary students? Joe also traveled to Rowville Secondary College in Melbournes outer east, a school which has more than 1800 students across two campuses. He sat down with the principal Julie Kennedy, to discuss the creative solutions her school developed to solve the logistical challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

Joe

Julie Kennedy is the principal of Rowville Secondary College and she joins us now on the talking teaching podcast. Welcome.

Julie

It's very wonderful to be here. It's a first experience for me.

Joe

Let go into the challenge that switching to remote learning and remote teaching has happened. I mean, this is quite a large school, over 1800 students, how's the transition been?

Julie

In some ways, I think we were incredibly lucky because some of the structures that we've had in place really helped us. So we made the decision pretty early on that to do this journey well we would use as much of what we knew as we possibly could and introduce as little of new compulsory things. So we had a must, could, should list. The must, could, should was a part of a remote learning guidelines pack that we put together. That pack probably took a good solid three weeks. So the technology for us wasn't such an issue. It was more about what does a remote lesson look like? So that's dramatically different to a face to face lesson. How do you do a dance class? How do you do AFL coaching, we had to be really creative around all those sorts of things and it took some time to work out the technical aspects of doing that but that's where our greatest benefit has come. I've seen such creativity around how people are doing that.

Joe

You mentioned there that there's been a lot of teacher creativity in able to overcome some of those obstacles. So how have they done that?

Julie

It's easiest to visualize probably in the Sports Academy with our coaches. It's always been like coaching was always a face to face thing, but they really developed these fantastic training packages where they could work together, a couple of coaches, so they'd bring the students in virtually into a training session. It was very similar to what they'd be doing face to face so they managed to work it out.

Joe

How did a typical day during remote teaching and learning for Rowville Secondary College look like?

Julie

When we first did the planning we were planning for an environment that would have a huge number of unwell people. So we wanted to have that regular schedule but allow flexibility, so if a student wasn't able to be in that lesson live, they could be asynchronously in the lesson. So we ran them so that they could be there at the right time or, or do it later on and the teacher was the same. They could either be live there in the lesson, or they could record things, and then answer questions by email later on.

Joe

What have the parents made of this switch to remote learning? what's been their feedback?

Julie

Well, I have been absolutely blown away by the parents feedback. I have not had one negative email. There is just this great sense of community, it's really wonderful, it's not just about the teachers have come together, or the students have come together, we're really got the connection between teachers, between students, between parents, that triad of communit. I've never felt it so strongly, so it's a it's a great reward out of what we thought was going to be incredibly challenging.

Joe

What can you put that down to from a school perspective, because that isn't and hasn't been the experience of other schools. So how did Rowville get it so right?

Julie

I think there's probably a lot of elements that have come together for us. I've done a lot of reflecting on it and each school has a school strategic plan, but that pulls you in a lot of different directions. When you push all that busyness away and focus on; we've just got one job and that's high quality teaching and learning in a remote environment. So we stopped all of the meetings and just allowed teachers time to collaborate. We focused on health and well being, so if the learning is, if you're not in the right headspace for the learning, that's okay. The most important thing is that your health and well being is good. So we really talked about that, you know, put your own oxygen mask on before you help the the passengers. So that was a focus, a focus on relationships. There's been a lot of public stories about how teachers are really feeling under pressure or have felt under pressure during this time, and in some cases, they feel like they've had to plan and execute two types of lessons for some students who've had to come to school, for some who have been online. So how teachers at Rowville Secondary College reacted to this? So we were very careful that we said it's impossible to do two sets of lessons. You can't, you might be able to do it, it's probably not impossible, but you couldn't do it in any sort of quality way. So our students who were at school, were doing exactly the same as the students who are at home, so they only had one set of lessons to prepare. We had to reduce the amount that teachers were wanting to do the one on one feedback, they really felt compelled and they were working into, you know, very late at night, not having morning tea not having lunch time. The key that we believed was in collaboration, any work that's as big as this, you can't do on your own. So we had to bring

staff together and give them the tools that they could collaborate, even when they're working remotely. So one of the first things we did was set up a professional learning community on Microsoft Teams for each group of teachers. Those teams have been incredibly effective, the teachers have used them in quite a sophisticated way to collaborate and in fact, the feedback from them is they believe that they are better collaborators now than they've ever been.

Joe

I mean, I've spoken to a couple of other people, they're talking about things, I mean, you mentioned parent teacher interviews and those sorts of things and the amount of travel that takes, you know, is that something that you might potentially be looking at a transforming having used this digital remote learning teaching environment?

Julie

Absolutely, we're really keen to capture what has worked really well for us and not letting that go. For us the very first and most urgent is that we because we're a dual campus, our year 11 and 12 students travel between campuses for different subjects, so we've had to figure out well, how can we allow students to access those classes from their base campus? Our teachers are live streaming their classes so that a student from the other campus can come into the lesson. One of the struggles about keeping the benefits of this going is how do you handle face to face teaching alongside what might be remote teaching? The really important thing for us to think about is for those students who've thrived in this environment, how do we support them? To keep that going? There's a body of students who just didn't connect to remote learning. Very few who didn't connect at all, but a significant number who didn't connect as much as as we would want them to.

Joe

Do you know roughly how many students you found, were not engaging the way that you really wanted them to?

Julie

Maybe 10, 15%. Something like that. So a significant number.

Joe

What would some of the reasons be why some of those students aren't engaging? We've heard things about equity of access to resources throughout this pandemic and we've heard and you know, various things as to why some students might be vulnerable in this, but what been your experience? What's the school's experience been?

Julie

So it wasn't lack of technology for us because we had we got a device out to everyone who indicated that they didn't have a device. I really, and again, there's no science behind this it's just my instinct, is that, school suits the majority of students, and it doesn't suit, the structures, do not suit a proportion of students. We have students who love practical based activities, to be doing activities that they don't see the connection to, it doesn't relate to them in their world, particularly in younger year levels where there are

less electives, is something our system doesn't do so well, in my opinion. So I think that, I said earlier that we wanted to really capture what's worked well here and that's the talk that I'm hearing in the network of schools as well that we've got an opportunity to really shift things now.

Joe

Forgive me, I'm not sure if it's something you can quantify right away but I'm curious to know because you've spoken about how the students had a, by and large, a pretty positive experience with this and by the sound of things a lot, a lot more students engaged with their schoolwork than they ordinarily would. Do you think that might translate to higher results at the end of this year?

Julie

I hope so. I believe that if you have a focus on learning rather than teaching, and there's really focusing on the students being skilled up, so that you force them into thinking, and in some classes if they just need to remember you tell me what I need to know, I'll remember it, but there's not a lot of thinking other than remembering going on. So they've been forced into that, we've given them the shovel they've had to dig. So I cannot comprehend that that wouldn't translate into higher results. I've got everything crossed about that.

Joe

Well, Julie Kennedy, thank you so much for your time and for your knowledge and sharing your wonderful stories with us on the talking teaching podcast.

Julie

It's been my absolute pleasure. Thank you.

Joe

As Julie highlighted, there is a significant number of students she identified that didn't engage during the period of remote learning. It's not an uncommon story. Janet Clinton is a professor in evaluation at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and her recent report 'supporting vulnerable children in the face of a pandemic' was prepared for the Australian Government at the height of the pandemic. Genevieve spoke with Professor Clinton about her report, how we classify vulnerable students, how many could be in the Australian system and what can be done to stop these vulnerable students slipping through the cracks.

Genevieve

Janet, thanks for joining us today on talking teaching.

Janet

You're welcome

Genevieve

when we talk about vulnerable children in the Australian context, what do we actually mean and how many children are we actually talking about?

Janet

So when you attempt to define if you like, vulnerable children, you'll find many, many definitions. In the current report, I went to the Productivity Commission. That really described a number of characteristics of vulnerable children, which really focuses on poverty, number one, so lower socio economic background and understanding aspects of behavioral issues, families at risk, in fact, in some states and territories, we talked about rural remote, and obviously, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being vulnerable, children with Special Needs, behavioral issues. So not only are there a range of characteristics, but the more of those characteristics you bring into the definition, then the greater the number. So if we were going to estimate I would suggest that the figure is somewhere between 20 to 30 percent of our children within the Australian context that have at least one characteristics that could consider them as being vulnerable.

Genevieve

That's a huge percentage of children who have at least one characteristic of vulnerability. How have we ended up in that situation?

Janet

So, again, what you have to consider is just because you're in a lower socioeconomic background, does that actually mean you're vulnerable? In not all cases. It's kind of a mix of social, physical, behavioral, psychological and cognitive factors. You put all those things together, then regardless of living in a lower socio economic background, you might actually fair really, really well.

Genevieve

These are the students who have not really been disadvantaged by being out of the classroom for 10 weeks or so, which you talk about in your report, but you did mention that there are some young people who might have been tipped into the vulnerable status because of the pandemic and I'm just wondering who these students are, what might have happened that they're now in a vulnerable situation?

Janet

Think of it as a continuum. So there's a group of students who have high protective factors, have access, they're not low socioeconomic areas, they've got engagement, etc, then you've got a group in the middle, who are not necessarily, at this point in time, vulnerable. Then we've got a group of children who we know, have some level of these characteristics that we're talking about. So a vulnerable group, a group in the middle that could possibly given circumstances become vulnerable, or move into that more protective factor, and then a group that are going to be fine. So if you think that this particular pandemic exacerbates risk, then our assumption is that some of those children who will not get in a vulnerable group, but face issues of access, you know, families become more at risk, then it's quite feasible that some of these children could move into that high risk or vulnerable character situation. If they're already high risk, it's quite feasible that this could increase their risk.

Genevieve

It's a very complex area, isn't it? Because it's not just the responsibilities of schools, I imagine, to help kids who are in this sort of vulnerable situation. It also ranges across Health, and Family and protective services and yet schools are the ones who are sort of expected always to pick these kids up and fix them up. Considering that, what can schools do to help these kids now that schools are starting to reopen?

Janet

Number one, do what they do really well, which is really understand the needs of our Children. So when they come back, for example, it's seeing how everything falls into place and recognizing that they can actually assess, diagnose, if you like how kids are faring, and where they need to put that greatest effort. So for example, ensuring that there is a targeted approach to children's needs, as opposed to just assuming that one size fits all; calling for support, where we can see that some of our children need to develop a little bit more of an adaptive resilience to being able to deal with what's gone before and what's coming down the line. And so really work on you know, investing in multiple forms of resources and approaches to support our children and our families. Our teachers, very well trained to understand children's needs, now, supplying the need for social emotional development might not be what every teacher can do, but if they work collectively and understanding that there are multiple resources out there, they can have a collective impact on our children.

Genevieve

What can we do to ensure that the teachers are okay as well?

Janet

Leadership teams need to be considering how the teachers are actually faring. Anxiety is heightened, coming back will heighten that, so resources communication, recognizing and building capacity through recovery, I think is going to be really important. As you hinted, this is a really complex area and what we need to be ensuring that we are coordinating all of our activities, that includes support for our teachers, includes support for our children, include support for our families, and reaching out and working together.

Genevieve

One of the big challenges that teachers had when suddenly everyone's at home and teaching remotely, was actually the platforms that they were using, the equipment that they had or didn't have, the way families were able to adapt to remote learning. But in your report, you talk about that this is actually a sort of a wider problem than just access to computers and bandwidth and that really, it's about equity of access. I'm just wondering what this means and what do we need to do to address these inequalities?

Janet

It's quite clear that just providing good access is not enough. So what we need to consider is it's not actually low digital access, but low digital engagement that might exacerbate risk for people. So one of the arguments that we put forward is if we consider the life course of our children who are vulnerable to those who have these high level of protective factors, so non vulnerability, what we've got to watch over time is

has the element of digital engagement, or digital inclusion as the literature often talks about, if we don't have that inclusiveness are we widening the equity gap? And in this case, we're arguing Yes. But in providing access, what we need to consider is the capacity and the capability not only of our children and our families to engage, but our teachers to actually absorb and adapt to working in this new blended online environment, because not all of them are comfortable in that environment.

Genevieve

So in the report, you refer to some of the other sort of crises that some research has been done around from Hurricane Katrina and the Christchurch earthquakes. What were the big lessons that we learned from those crises?

Janet

Number one, when our students come back to school, that from a learning outcome perspective, and that's engagement, and student attainment or achievement, that you don't actually see the impact over, you know, after a year's time, because teachers had targeted the needs, they'd moved to schools with greater resources, greater input, greater access, and really working on what the students need. So there's a number of reports that are coming out that demonstrates that after crisis, some children do exceptionally well, in this one to one environment, another struggle, and they might not be the ones that we predicted would do poorly or would defeat. You know, the interesting one that also came out of this for me is thinking about, I would never have thought about early childhood, that group, that early education period as being at risk, but in this period, it's quite feasible that some of our students development may have been interrupted.

Genevieve

And Janet is this why we brought back our preps, and one and twos, and year 11 and 12 back to School first?

Janet

Yes, absolutely. If you think about all the reports, these these rapid synthesis that went to government, everybody was saying, you know, really consider this development phase because in the early years focusing on language development, cognitive development, literacy and numeracy. So we know if children's development in literacy is interrupted significantly and they're not really successful readers by the time they're eight, then they're going to struggle in the next few years. So if you move to the other end, then what you see is the group of students who are already disengaged, so what's the probability of them coming back? And what we want, we want our students to have an extended period of time in education. The more education they get, the better the probability that they will have healthy, happy, functional involvement in society down the line. So what about those students living in vulnerable circumstances, but are working hard to become a senior student at school, year 11 and 12? so they're a bit vulnerable, but they're hanging in there, they're doing incredibly well, this might interrupt them. So it's that shift in those two key areas that we really need to be considering.

Genevieve

What would you say the greatest lessons are that we've learned so far from COVID-19 in terms of education?

Janet

So number one, that we can actually teach online, I think we have destroyed the stigma that online learning can't be as successful as face to face, in actual fact what we know from the evidence is that if you have a great teacher, they're great online, and they're great face to face. We've understood that we do need to adapt a little bit when we're doing things online. We've also understood that some of our children actually are fantastic in this online space because our teachers are targeting their needs. The other one of course, is the engagement of our parents, our parents, I would always argue, aren't teachers and shouldn't be, but parents engagement in the learning process, parents understanding the language of learn and where the children are actually at and what their needs are and making learning a embedded thing in their lives so that children learn the idea that this learning thing is what's going to get them through life and it's fantastic.

Genevieve

It's great to hear these positives that have come out of the COVID-19 pandemic and in some ways, it seems that it's an exciting new chapter, perhaps in education, where parents are more aware of their children's education. They're more involved, there seems to be growing respect for teachers. I think, you know, there will be some good things that come out of this

Janet

Absolutely. Education over time has gone through a bit of a space revolution. We've actually taken a greatest step forward in understanding the classroom. The classroom has expanded, expanding the classroom and inviting others in, from what we could see, had a tremendous impact for many, keeping in mind that still within our vulnerable groups, access to this new classroom hasn't been as positive as we would have liked.

Genevieve

What do we need to do next for vulnerable children?

Janet

Again, if I if I consider what teachers do best. They diagnose what's going on, what are the needs of the children that are in front of them, so for example, it would be a mistake to assume that all of that knowledge that they may have missed out on in the disruptive period in first term or second term, they're going to be able to put all that in the next two terms, well that would be a mistake. Consider how you're going to implement to target student needs and rebuild the learner profile and engagement, and then evaluate how they're going. Then where those students need support, that's where you bring in your other support mechanisms; keeping an eye watching, monitoring, at that excellent diagnosis, and ensuring that you're using the strength of the families and the communities and the sectors that are ready and willing to help. That's what we need to be doing.

Genevieve

Thank you so much for your time today, Janet, and for giving us your insights into this extremely important issue of our vulnerable children in our schools.

Janet

Thanks

Genevieve

Professor Janet Clinton from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

Joe

That's just about it for this episode of talking teaching, and if you've got comments you'd like to make about what we've talked about in this episode or any other, you can get in touch via the talking teaching email. That's talking-teaching@unimelb.edu.au.

Genevieve

Talking teaching is produced by myself, Genevieve Costigan, Joe, Zane Kingi and Karl Smith. That's all for now. Thanks for listening and take care.