Transcript of Interview with Claire Cunliffe by Alex Hinely

Interviewee: Claire Cunliffe
Interviewer: Alex Hinely
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Abstract:
Claire Cunliffe, a high school mathematics teacher from Baltimore, Maryland, compares the early implementation of distance learning procedures among public and private school districts. While Claire reflects on the positive response to distance learning among students at private schools, including the increased ability for students to self-pace, she expresses concern over the lack of funding and limited resources available for students attending public schools. Claire makes the argument that technological unavailability among minority populations is exacerbating the opportunity gap among urban students. Reflecting on the conflicting responses of city and state leaders, including Governor Larry Hogan, Claire offers suggestions for reopening schools that ultimately place the decision in the hands of parents and healthcare professionals, instead of politicians. Claire conveys optimism that distance learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic will permanently reshape the educational sector by encouraging interactive approaches to teaching, promoting community building among students, and displaying the benefits of incorporating digital elements into the classroom curriculum.

Alex Hinely 0:05
What is your name and occupation?

Claire Cunliffe 0:08
My name is Claire Cunliffe, and I am a high school math teacher. And I also provide support for brand-new teachers and first and second-year teachers.

Alex Hinely: 0:22
What are the primary things you do on a day-to-day basis? For example, your job, your extracurricular activities, et cetera.

Claire Cunliffe 0:31
Pre-COVID or post-COVID?

Alex Hinely 0:35
Both.

Claire Cunliffe 0:37
Okay. My normal life before COVID was, usually get up around 5:00-5:30, go to the gym, get to school around 6:30 or 7:00, do work for like an hour, and then sometimes I'd have like an L-block. So, at my school sometimes, the math classes have like a double block. And then teach. I

taught statistics and an accelerated geometry with algebra II course at an independent school in Baltimore this year. So, I do that, meet with like kids, parents, faculty meeting, department meetings. I ran like a girls' STEM program. So, I do like all kinds of stuff for that. Ran like an eco-justice program, worked on the equity and inclusion committee. So, I have meetings like most of my free periods or lunches. After school, I would like meet with kids, then go to the gym again, usually, if I don't have another meeting, go home, make dinner, grade and plan for a few hours, sleep by 10:00. I'm like active in my church, so I go to Bible study once a week, go to church on Sundays, see my family, friends, mostly on weekends. It's like hard to see people during the week. Post-COVID is a lot more crazy. Thankfully, our school had—was one-to-one, so kids already had computers. So, it was just a lot more like making sure kids were mentally and emotionally okay and their families were. And so my day would start a little bit later, but my hours were a lot crazier, because I'd be interacting with students and families like online from like 8:00 to 8:00 most days, and it was like harder to kind of have that like rhythm and balance. I ended up moving in with a friend and their fiancé so that I wouldn't be alone, because I like live by myself a lot of the time. So, yeah, COVID is just a little bit different, for sure. And now it's summer, so in the summer, I usually train new teachers for Teach for America. So, I did that this summer too.

Alex Hinely 2:49
Where do you live, and what is it like to live there?

Claire Cunliffe 2:53
I live in Baltimore, Maryland. I bought my first house like two years ago, and I really like living there. I think Baltimore is a city that has a lot of economic disparities and is really racially segregated. So, I live in a lower income block neighborhood, near to where I go to church, and close to where I used to teach but pretty far from where I teach now, because I teach at a really upper income, predominantly white school, and yeah. I don't know what else to add. Can you repeat the question? I feel like I missed part of it.

Alex Hinely 3:40
Where do you live, and what is it like to live there?

Claire Cunliffe 3:44
Yeah, that's about the same.

Alex Hinely 3:47
When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it? How have your thoughts changed since then?

Claire Cunliffe 3:56
It's so hard to remember. It was kind of a crazy time, because at my school, is was like the day before we were supposed to go to spring break, and so we were at the last period of the day, and the school just like told the kids to go home early and that they weren't gonna come back but that teachers are gonna come back the next day. It was like on a Thursday, so like kids normally would come back Friday, and then we start spring break. So, kids didn't come back Friday, and we like didn't really know anything, and we just had a bunch of meetings about like what we

could do. And I remember, it was like mindset, like, "Oh, this is gonna be like two to three weeks. So, like, maybe we'll be gone for spring break, and then have another week of like, online learning and then we'll be fine." And I think now, my thoughts, I guess, have really changed. Like, it seems like we're in this for the long haul. And so, it's not just these like stopgap measures of like, "How do we replicate the learning experience for kids?" But a lot more like, "How do we rethink what we think about education and how we deliver quality instruction?" And so, a lot of the way I'm like planning and delivering instruction and thinking about having to do that in the fall is like dramatically different than when I first heard about COVID. I think like, personally, it felt like it—I think it's feeling more and more scary and real, because I'm starting to know more and more people who have been diagnosed with it and so that's been like hard to try to navigate and think through like what that means. I think, especially, as like a younger person who like doesn't have a family yet, navigating like how to still see people, that part has been different and definitely like, I've had different feelings about that throughout this COVID experience.

Alex Hinely 5:40
So, transitioning to your employment. How many years have you worked in a K-12 setting, and what initially made you want to work with children?

Claire Cunliffe 5:51
I worked in the K-12 setting for the last five years for my full-time employment. As soon as I graduated from college, I joined Teach for America. So, I started teaching in Baltimore, Maryland and getting my master's full-time at Johns Hopkins concurrently. And then after that, I went to a charter school, and I'm now at a private school. So, I've worked in like all different types of school settings over the last five years and worked with, like new teacher coaching and new teacher preparation over the last three years, I would say. What initially drew me was I am from a really diverse city in California, and so my high school had the biggest—what do you call it? Like, opportunity gap in the state of California. We used to call it the achievement gap. And so, like white and Asian students outperformed black and brown students by the biggest margins at my high school. And so, I grew up in a low-income, predominately black and brown neighborhood. And so my second or third year of college—I was originally a business economics major, and I realized that none of my friends that I knew from home from my neighborhood were still in college at that point, and I realized that I like couldn't go work for Deloitte or do like financial consulting, and so I decided to change my major to education. And I chose Teach for America just because it's the cheapest option to get my master's. I knew that I really wanted to teach, and so I was thinking about applying to different UC [University of California] programs or Cal States, but after I was accepted as a junior, it just didn't financially make sense to go like $50,000 into debt, when I couldn't make a salary for two years and get the same quality of education at Johns Hopkins for free.

Alex Hinely 7:42
Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your employment status? If so, in what ways?

Claire Cunliffe 7:50
Not dramatically. I mean, it's changed like how my employment looks in that it's looking like it'll be mostly virtual. Although, working at a private school, I think there's a lot more pressure to go back in person. So, like our pre-K—or like our preschool and then like pre-K through seventh or

eighth grade are all gonna go back in person, and then the high school is like unsure yet if we're gonna go back. So, that I think will potentially change my employment, because I know a lot of the older teachers at my school are not planning on going back with us in-person, and so I could see that like affecting my job a lot. In terms of like salary, they did—they—they had like a big financial crisis for the quarter where COVID was hit. So, I think they were like $500,000 short of their projected budget, and so we didn't get our like contractual raises for the year. So, in terms of like that regard, that like changed my pay on that slightly, I guess, but they like hired me to do an additional position, which I guess is also COVID-related. So, I'm now like the head of technology for the high school and support like tech integration and like meet with our outside consulting firm of like how to do that. So, I guess I like got an added position right now because of COVID. So, kinda up and down. [laughs]

Alex Hinely 9:13
Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the employment status of others in your school district? If so, in what ways?

Claire Cunliffe 9:22
In my school district, not as much. So, at the independent school I work at, they let go of some teaching fellows and people who are part-time because they just needed more full-time teachers. Because they're trying to come back in-person, they just want to reduce class sizes, so they need a lot more full-time teachers, so that did impact peoples' positions. And my school is also going through a bunch of like equity issues, so they've changed the employment for different people into like diversity, equity and inclusion office. For the Baltimore City School District, employment hasn't really changed, but they also haven't really figured out what they're gonna do yet. Typically, Baltimore City always has a huge shortage of teachers, and so I anticipate that will be the same this year. And maybe more so, because if the city tries to encourage teachers to go back in person, our union is really strong and probably won't allow that, and many teachers will leave as a result. So...

Alex Hinely 10:25
What concerns do you have about the effects of COVID-19 on your employment and school funding?

Claire Cunliffe 10:36
For the independent school, I mean—I mean, I worry that like if we don't go back, like parents are not gonna pay $40,000 a year for their kids to like have online learning. So, I worry that my school will like make that decision that we're not gonna make it. For the public school district— we are like a Democratic city, but we have a Republican governor for Baltimore City. And so, the legislature had just passed a—like radical reallocation of funding to be more equitable for the city, and the governor vetoed it using COVID as an excuse. And so, I'm worried that like students in the city and teachers in the city are not gonna get the funding that they deserve, and that the legislature wanted them to have. It's called the Kirwan Commission, if you like want to look it up for like COVID funding. That's gonna have like a huge impact, and particularly for students in Baltimore City, where there's such a resource gap. Most students—or not most, but a lot of students don't have access to the technology they need. And so, I think the like achievement data is gonna just keep getting further and further apart. I like tutor a few students

privately, right now also, as a result of COVID, and that felt really weird, because I know that my students from Baltimore City are like not receiving that. And so, like for my private school students, they had no—experienced no learning loss as a result, because we still met. Like, we met all of the goals in sequence I had for the year. Whereas, for my students who are in Baltimore City, in talking with their teachers, they didn't really have access to education for the last quarter. And particularly if they didn't have access to technology, they didn't have anything that they could do. And so, I'm just really worried that the achievement data is gonna get further and further apart.

Alex Hinely 12:30
Did your school district close because of COVID-19? Who made this decision, and when did it occur?

Claire Cunliffe 12:38
So, for the independent school that I work at, there's like this consortium of all the like private or independent schools in Baltimore City, and that decision was kind of made collectively, and it was made, I want to say on like March 11th or 12th. It was very early on, and it was because it was like right before most people's spring break. The city closed the next day after, and they were closed by force from the state. So, the city had actually earlier in the day made a press release that they were not gonna close, and then the governor came out two hours later saying they were gonna close, which like undercut a lot of the work the city was trying to do. And that's—like was evidence that they weren't talking to each other. So, yeah. So, for Baltimore City, the governor made the decision, and for my particular school, the head of school in conjunction with the other heads of the private schools made that decision.

Alex Hinely 13:33
How did you, your coworkers, students, and parents respond to news of the closure?

Claire Cunliffe 13:41
I think everyone was like glad that we are closed, because it was starting to feel more unsafe. Like we have three students who went to the like—I don't know, it was some like RNC [Republican National Committee] convention, where they were like with people who had COVID. We have like multiple students who are exchange students from China who like hadn't been able to go home for a long time, because the virus was more prevalent there earlier on. And so, I think it was something a lot of people had been fearful about for weeks, so to finally get the decision that it was closed was good. I think it then like created a lot more questions, like it did for many people, around like, "How do we respond to that, and how do we prepare when you don't have the time to adequately prepare? How do we like meet the needs of this like giant crisis that's creating like mental health and emotional issues for kids and families?" We have a lot of families who work in healthcare, and so their living situation was dramatically different. Kids had increased responsibilities, but we also wanted to like honor the like trust parents and families have put in us to continue students' academics. So, I think it's really been a balancing act that like sometimes has felt good for us as teachers and students, and sometimes I felt like too much work or not enough work for students who are bored. So, I think it's been a really mixed bag.

Alex Hinely 15:02

Who should be responsible for making decisions about school closures? Explain whether you believe the decision should be made by local school districts, county offices of education, state officials, federal officials, or another agency.

Claire Cunliffe 15:22
I think it really depends where you live. Like, I think—so, Maryland's a relatively rural state, but Baltimore City, and then—which is its own county, even though it's Baltimore City—and then the counties further south, PG [Prince George's] County and Montgomery and Howard County, which are really like DC [District of Columbia] suburbs, they are—just have like a ton of diverse students and are a lot more densely populated. And so, I think it would be hard to make that decision at a state level, because what's true for the remaining counties is they're very rural and spread out, and people don't move around as much. And so, I think what might be true on the eastern shore of Maryland, which is super rural, is very different from what's gonna be true in PG County. And so, I think, at least in my state context, it makes a lot of sense to have counties make that decision rather than at the state level, because everyone's reality is so different. But I think that decision like needs to include a lot more parents and teachers. And I've always leaned more towards like parents and families making those decisions, because we're really here to serve them and like meet their needs. And yes, like teaching is my job and my profession, and I love it. And—but at the end of the day, like I'm there to serve families and communities. And so if my families want to have in-person education, then that's part of like me as a professional deciding if I'm comfortable with that risk or not, but I don't think it's on me as a teacher to decide if we should be going back or not like, I'm not a healthcare professional. So, I would like to see counties making that decision in conjunction with healthcare professionals, while like listening to the needs of families. I don't necessarily think that it's on teachers. I think teachers can help once the decision is made, of like, "How do we educate these kids?" That's where like our expertise is. But my expertise is not in deciding whether or not to close school.

Alex Hinely 17:14
How would you compare the effectiveness of distance learning to in-person learning?

Claire Cunliffe 17:20
I think how we did it in the fall—in the spring, for most people, was not effective. I think we tried to replicate in-person strategies, which you just like can't do in distance learning. And so, I have been thinking a lot about like, there are a lot of assets we have in distance learning that we haven't truly like thought all the way through. And so some things I'm thinking about as a math teacher is it's really easy for students to access information, and so I can actually push them to have better critical thinking skills through comparing methods, because they can watch like three different videos about the same process and compare the merits, which is a really different conversation than we can have in person, when they're just hearing me explain something one or two different ways. And so I think if we want to like be successful in this, and I think it has the power to be really successful, we have to focus on like differentiation so that we're actually meeting the needs of all students and changing assignments based off what kids need. That's one of the like best things about distance learning is no student knows what the other student is doing, and so you can meet kids where they're at. I think the other aspect is using more of a flipped classroom model, and so teachers need to be better facilitators, rather than lecturers, which has always been the case in education, but I think a lot of us still default to lecturing. And

so, I'd like to see us actually really think through like, "How do we make distance learning be as, if not more, impactful than in-person learning?"

Alex Hinely 18:46
How has your school district ensured equal access to distance learning materials for students of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds?

Claire Cunliffe 18:55
So, again, like my unique school context is an independent school, and so we are already one-to-one. When students come, they have that. We did have some students who didn't have access to internet, and so the school like provided internet for them. In Baltimore City, the city struck a deal with Xfinity to provide like hotspots for the entire city. And that's about to lapse, and so that's gonna be really problematic in the fall if they don't reach some kind of deal. For city kids, most of them did not have access to technology, and so students were doing things with phones, teachers we're trying to drop off packets, students were supposed to come to schools to do packets, or to pick up packets and food. But it was pretty—it was a mess, and like students did not have equal access to resources at all.

Alex Hinely 19:49
How has distance learning affected students' academic progress?

Claire Cunliffe 19:56
I don't have hard data for the city, so I can't really say more, like beyond from anecdotally talking to teachers. Most of my friends will see maybe 25% to 50% of their students. So, 50% to 75% of students just they didn't learn during that semester. For my students, it was interesting. Again, like access is not as much of an issue but engagement was, particularly for my students with learning differences, especially like ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] or other executive functioning. They really struggled to stay organized, and I saw their grades drop dramatically. But for other students who are maybe like more introverted or just like process better through reading more or watching videos, I saw some students actually do a lot better in distance learning because they had more time to self-pace, and they could use a lot of different resources. So, it really depended on the kid and how they learned.

Alex Hinely 20:52
What have you learned about yourself or your students through distance learning?

Claire Cunliffe 20:58
I learned that my kids are like super adoptable, and also, they really love community. So, I use my—my synchronous time with my students to just do a lot of community building, and that was like their favorite time, and they always asked for more time to just like sit on Zoom and do work together. And so that was really cool to see that the work I'd put in at the beginning of the year to build community really came alive, and we kept doing a lot of those things together. So, they made like virtual yearbooks for each other and would give each other shout-outs and would go into breakout rooms just so they could like sit and do math together. So, that was like awesome to see that they really like craved being around each other and doing math together. So, that was awesome. I think, about myself, is I'm more adaptable than I knew and more creative, but I

definitely—this is like a gap of my pedagogy, and I want to learn a lot better, like how to reach kids and teach effectively through these online platforms, because I have ideas, and I'm like starting to do things, but I don't think I have like a sound pedagogical framework of—of doing that right now.

Alex Hinely 22:06
So, looking ahead, if the decision were yours to make, what would the 2020-2021 school year look like?

Claire Cunliffe 22:16
I think I would give parents the choice, as a lot of districts are doing. Like, I think I would do a survey and offer in-person, hybrid, and completely digital models, and then like assign teachers based off what they felt most comfortable doing. So, for teachers who just wanted to teach in-person, they could just teach in-person. For teachers who wanted to just do virtual, they could just do virtual. And then maybe for the hybrid kids, maybe they like see the in-person teacher, but then they have other assignments from the virtual teachers. But I think to me, that seems like the best way to differentiate for the needs of the adults in the profession, but also honoring kids and families and like what they need to be true from their education. Because the reality is, like school also provides this huge like resource in our economy in terms of daycare, and so like if kids don't have a place to be, that's really gonna be hard. And I also just think like developmentally for kids, they like have to have those social-emotional learning pieces, and we can't really replicate that well, virtually. And so, I think that like as far as just like space to do so, I would try to do in-person. I think if you look at studies in like Finland, South Korea, Denmark, there are models where nations have like taken Coronavirus seriously and got their disease down and opened schools in a safe and effective way. And so, like I would hope that as a nation, we could actually start to take this virus seriously, so that we could really prioritize our kids. It's crazy to me that we prioritize like opening beaches and tattoo parlors and liquor stores over school. So, that's what I would do if I had all the power.

Alex Hinely 23:57
What procedures, precautions, and protocols do you believe need to be in place for schools to resume in-person learning? Explain whether this is or is not plausible.

Claire Cunliffe 24:11
Well, again, I'm not a healthcare professional, so I'm not entirely sure. But I think for little kids, it's gonna be really hard to help them like socially distance, but they also have a lower disease load. And so, thinking about like what class size works, like I think the pod model has been really effective like in those same countries I named, where kids are in like small group pods and like stay together. And like—at least the South Korea study I'm thinking of, they showed that that's true for kids under like 10 or 11. And so I also think developmentally, like particularly for pre-K through two, like we need to do whatever we can to have those kids in person in school. Because if kids don't get like number sense, the literary skills—literacy skills or just like student skills at those ages, like it's gonna be really hard to catch them up later. Like, those are so critical. So, I would put like all my resources for those three to four grade bands. I also think middle school, developmentally, like kids need to be around other kids, that's when they're like starting to develop who they are and their identities and also like boundaries and things like that,

and so I think school has an important function then. I think in the upper grades, like nine through 12, I think they can do distance learning, and we can train teachers to be effective distance instructors. So, I guess, yeah, I would like have schools like all prioritize pre-K through two to be in-person, maybe some hybrid, something for like three through five, in-person as much as possible for six through eight, and then distance for nine through 12.

Alex Hinely 25:48
So, the final question is what lasting impacts will the COVID-19 pandemic have on the education sector?

Claire Cunliffe 25:57
I think it's gonna be a really defining moment. Like, I think that we can either leverage this to change what's been broken in the education system for the last two centuries and really center our low-income students and our students of color and female students and gender-nonconforming students and really think about, like, "How is our instruction differentiated and honoring all these things different identities?" Or we can continue to prioritize the like skills that we already have, which is just in-person lecturing, and I can really see like the end of the professional—like professional nature of our job. And so, I think like if we position ourselves to adapt and change and be like leaders, then I can see like families actually like caring about what we're offering their students and really working with us. Whereas right now, I think the narrative is—is not necessarily as student-centered as it should be. And so, I would love to see as a result of this that we really think through how can we make our teaching practices be entirely student-centered rather than teacher-centered. And I think if we're able to do that, I think COVID could have a really positive lasting impact on the profession.

Alex Hinely 27:15
Okay. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview and for sharing your thoughts.

Claire Cunliffe 27:20
You're welcome.