

Transcript of Interview with Lauren Mottles

Interviewee: Lauren Mottles

Interviewer: Joey Dorion

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Location (Interviewee): San Diego, CA

Location (Interviewer):

Abstract: This is a recorded conversation with a teaching colleague, Lauren, who works as the Math Department Chair at St. James Academy in San Diego. Since the beginning of the pandemic, and especially in California since the stay-at-home order on March 17th, teachers have done the incredible in teaching their students at a distance. Lauren shares her experiences at her school, reflections, and thoughts on the current state of education.

Lauren Mottles 00:01

I'm nervous.

Joey Dorion 00:03

Okay. So, good morning. Good afternoon. If you could please state your name, your title, and where you work for the record.

LM 00:11

My name is Lauren Mottles. I am a math teacher, slash eighth grade homeroom teacher, slash math department chair, slash many other hats at St. James Academy in Solana Beach, California.

JD 00:25

Thank you very much for joining us today Lauren. So just for what we'll be talking about today, we're trying to ascertain about the experiences of teachers adapting to the pandemic, adapting to distance learning, during this time of shutdown in the state of California, and also across the entirety of the country. So broadly speaking for you, Lauren, how have you found the the transition to distance learning to be? Have you had to transition? Are your students still in school? What is, what is happening in your district?

LM 01:00

Um, so the- I can't recall exactly, but we closed on Friday, March 13. Um, along with the rest of the schools, I believe in the state, elementary-wise, um, we- had inklings of closing earlier that week, so, um, as the youngest member of my staff, I started kind of doing some preparation with my students practicing zoom with them, getting them comfortable with different online platforms. We use online platforms normally, but I'm strictly relying on those platforms as their main form of communication and work and all that was a was a transition for them. And we then, the following week, Monday, Tuesday, had two planning days as teachers to kind of get our bearings and figure out a plan. And we met on campus but socially distanced, and we talked about kind of the best strategy. Should we have a schedule? Should the kids follow "Okay, 8:00 am I'm doing math, at 9:00 am I'm doing reading?" But we found that we couldn't- well, we decided that we wouldn't have much control over the students. And so we had to make it more of

a work at your own pace. Here's a bunch of tasks for the day, that includes live meetings, but they're not consistent in terms of classes every day. We prioritized math and English language arts, the elective classes and social studies, were not prioritized. We also developed a new system of grading, which took a long time and a lot of discussion. And we are now writing a narrative, as opposed to giving a score or a grade. We are going to let students and parents know, certain standards that we are addressing during this time, so we narrowed it down to two or three big standards. And then we are determining if the student is proficient, developing, or no evidence. So, it's not a fail- there's no way to fail a child, um, just because of the lack of access or issues at home or things like that. Um, so are kind of, it's not really not passing, but if we don't have enough evidence of the skill or the standard, then we're just going to put no evidence. So, it's been overall, as a 26-year-old, not too bad for me, but I'm sure for the- my my fellow teachers that are older and not as experienced in technology, it has been a challenge. So, I have been, I feel like my main role really, not only as a teacher, but I've been troubleshooting tech-wise for my peers. So that's been the hardest part, I think.

JD 03:54

So, a lot of changes, a lot of developments that needed to be implemented very quickly on the fly, it sounds like. You mentioned specifically that the students scheduled the normalness of what a school day is as been amended completely, in terms of timing in terms of pacing and subjects that they're taught. For you, specifically targeting math, have you noticed any discernible changes to their productivity, towards their their ability to learn? How have you found the experience of teaching math online and at a distance?

LM 04:34

I've actually found it to be okay. Um, I really wanted to make sure that my class felt normal, felt almost as if we were there. So, I do all my lessons prerecorded and I have done the same note-taking format that they have done all year. So, I am asking them, I can't force them, but I'm asking them to take notes along with me during the video. The homeworks are the same as they were before. I send PDFs, the only difference is the submissions and how they turn things in. I think they have gotten a little lazier with the showing work. And I'm 100% positive, they use Alexa or some sort of calculator. But that's something that I have no control over. Um, but as as education is changing, I think, overall, with or without this pandemic, we're headed in that direction in math anyway. Just because of the access of knowledge, that's for all subjects. I think. We have the internet, and we have all this in front of us. You know, there's a constant debate, and I could go into a whole nother interview about should we memorize our timetable? Um, but overall, I think it's been very successful. I have noticed, I've changed my assessment methods. Um, I've been giving multiple choice Google Forms, which doesn't require them- I don't have any work shown. But what I had- and they're allowed to use their notes and all resources, it's totally open note. Because, again, I can't that's something I can't monitor. But I have been adding a reflection component where they actually write out what resources did I use? How did I prepare for this assessment? Did I do well, if I didn't, what did I do wrong? And if they and I've been making them do corrections every time because there is like I said, no grade, so we can continue working on it, which I think is a benefit. And so that everyone gets their I think my last assessment, everyone reached proficiency, because we took the time to go back. Okay, what did we do wrong? Oh, I see. I went counterclockwise and said clockwise in my rotation. Now I can go- and I don't think I would have given as much time to reflect in a normal classroom setting.

So, I think that's one of the benefits that's come out of this is the the, there's a little bit more thoughtfulness to the assessment.

JD 07:00

Definitely. I want to highlight something specifically that you've focused on during the span of our conversation, which is a lot of adjustment and tailoring has been put into the student experience. How have you found the support system from families, the engagement that you've had to take with bringing parents into the educational sphere to fulfill a role that normally you would do? How is the communication? How's the connection, then, on a broad scale?

LM 07:32

I think overall very positive. I have the benefit of teaching middle school kids who are very literate in technology. So, I don't think they need to rely on their parents as much. However, I have had one on one Zooms with parents, on giving them tutorials, letting them know how their kids are doing. I think one of the concerns that a couple of parents mentioned was is my child getting- are they getting- Are they being prepared for high school as they normally would? Are they going to miss things? And I think naturally, you have to understand that, of course, they're going to miss a little bit, but I don't think it's- There's always going to be gaps, you know, regardless of situation. So, um, I think at this point, I, overall, I am going to finish my texts, and I believe that all my content will be at least delivered to the kids in terms of absorption. I'm not entirely sure that's something I can't really gauge until next year, when I see them again, hopefully, um, but the nice thing is at my site, I teach all the math for six, seventh and eighth. So, anything that happens in six that didn't catch, right now, I can readdress in seventh and the seventh to the eighth. So, honestly, my main focus right now is getting those eighth graders ready, because I won't see them again. So, um, but in terms back to your question of parents, they've been supportive. Um, they have kind of let a lot of them have let their kids take control of their learning, which I really appreciate putting them responsible, and they're in charge of their own learning so. But if someone needs a little kick in the behind, I'll let the parents know, and they're usually on top of it. So.

JD 09:17

Definitely. And you had spoken to a lack of fear of your ability to catch students and to have them in the upcoming year, to to fill in the gaps, to address any shortcomings. And overall, it seems so the experience has been positive for you, but there hasn't been a huge amount of hurdles to overcome. If you could indulge, have their- Have there been any shortcomings? Have there been any difficulties that you have specifically felt either as a, as a teacher, as a curriculum designer, in any capacity of your role as educator?

LM: 09:55

And do you mean difficulties just in general before the pandemic?

JD 10:00

Specifically, targeting around the transition or your experiences trying to teach them at a distance or concerns that you would have for students that you won't see, again, concerns that you have for those eighth graders moving into high school.

LM 10:15

Um, I have a couple. I really think there's just those handful of kids, overall, I think everyone will be fine. Um, but I do think there's a handful of students who had challenges before the pandemic, and the pandemic just made it that much more challenging. I think a lot of my English language learners are struggling, um, a lot of- it's pretty much the same handful of kids that include English language learners, students who struggled with motivation prior. And I think, unfortunately, some families with lack of parent support, not due to lack of care, but just due to their own obligations with work and other commitments, siblings, you know. There's a lot going on at home that, again, I can't control. But I try and support the child as much as they can virtually. I have small concerns, but again, I think it's all these things I can address in the next year. Um, and I keep in contact with families, even post grad, I tutor, you know, alumni. So, it's the nice thing about my school is it's a great community that stays pretty local, in terms of high school and a lot of siblings come back, and there's a lot of communication. So, um, it's kind of the standard problems of lack of technology or ability to use it. And just motivational struggles, just normal stuff that's just applied online now.

JD 11:55

Sure. And targeting something that you had said about community, have you- has the staff, broadly speaking, taken any efforts to try to fill in the gaps for students in terms of the socializing aspect, obviously, school is a place to learn about math about English language, etc. But there is a social component of recess, of seeing friends every day. Have any steps or efforts been made to address the shortcomings in those areas?

LM 12:23

Yes. We, last week, drove to every single eighth grader's house to drop off a gift bag in a yard sign. So, we drove over seven hours over 100 miles to all across North County, San Diego, to visit each eighth grader and there are a lot of tears and everyone was so happy just to see our faces even though we were across the street. We came honkin and crazy- a bunch of crazy ladies showed up. Um, and I think we've we've held a virtual Rock The School, which is a talent show, which I posted. We've also done it was my principal's birthday, we did a drive by to her house, all teachers are required to Zoom at least one to two times a week just for social purposes. It is difficult, I've sat in on a second grade Zoom and it is terribly challenging because they're all just like look at my stuff. And they're they can't sit still and but- God bless those ladies in the younger grades to have the patience to just let them play on Zoom and show each other pets and rooms and tours of their home. Um, but yes, so we've had a lot of social interaction. We also normally we go to Friday mass together, but they've done virtual mass. So, we post the virtual masses. We have virtual assemblies every Monday morning. So, we're still trying to create the whole community aspect of it. I have done a kind of teacher parody newscast video where teachers were sending in updates of what they've been up to during quarantine, which made a fake TV show which everyone got to see and loved. So yes, we've had a big community. I'm still in contact with all my eighth-grade parents weekly, we have an weekly school newsletter that continues to be sent out. We are planning a virtual graduation for eighth graders and also a party hopefully in the fall that we can actually celebrate physically together. But yeah, I don't feel like our community- I feel like it's gotten stronger. And I also really feel like the staff has gotten tighter, because of this. Because we've had to work. We have been forced to work together more than we ever have before. And we are having, even though I think it's- One thing about teachers

is that nobody else gets it unless you're a teacher, whatever it is. And we have built such a camaraderie and we can laugh about "man, this is hard." And we can all have an understanding. And you know whether or not we solve each other's problems, we all agree, it's hard. And it's- we take comfort in the fact that someone else knows that feeling as well. So.

JD 15:18

Sure. And I think final question, kind of wrapping up thoughts, if we can wrap up thoughts. You've mentioned, a lot of changes in the way that you assess students in the way that you interact with them. And the way that the relationships with your staff members and fellow teachers has changed. Has this time in quarantine, has this time adapting curriculum, adapting your teaching, has it changed anything about your beliefs in education? Has it changed anything fundamentally about you as a teacher that you want to carry forward into next year? Where is your head at, I suppose, looking into the future, looking into fall 2020 as a, as a potential return to normal, if you will?

LM 16:03

Um, I think the biggest shift in my philosophy of education, I guess, is the feedback and assessments. Um, like I said, it's- we're no longer giving a score. And I felt this year, in particular, my eighth graders, were solely motivated by score and score only, like, I will stomp on other people to get a better score. And I don't feel like they valued the knowledge gained or the learning or the work that, you know, went into that learning of that topic. I felt like their only goal was, "Oh, I got 100." "On what?" "I don't remember, but I know I got 100." You know? And I feel like I've done a really good job. It took a lot of work these past 10 weeks to shift their mindset, which in turn shifted mine, that our job is to learn not- It's about the learning, not the score. And I have given an immense amount of verbal written, written feedback of, "hey, what do you think happened here?" Let's have a conversation, virtually, about, you know, what your struggles were, whereas before, I don't think I would have taken that time to, uh, oh, they just didn't see it, you know, move on. Now we're being more reflective, and at least I am. And it's, it's more work, I have to say, because you're spending more time, you're giving more feedback. But I think because I'm on my laptop from 8am to 8pm, every day, I'm in my PJs, somehow that makes it okay. Um, it's just, I don't know. I think grading is going to be very different after this. Because number one, everyone's going to be at a different spot.

JD 17:53

Definitely.

LM 17:54

So, it's going to be hard to kind of set a bar. So, you really just have to emphasize the growth of where you were and where you're going. Um, not everyone's going to be at the same starting point or ending point, but we want to talk about, "wow, this person went from, you know, not knowing anything about fractions to being totally proficient, you know, within a matter of weeks." So, um, grading- I have a feeling grading is going to be very, very different. In the coming years, I think, again, in education, everything takes a very, very long time for the pendulum to swing. It's going to be a lot of standards-based grading. That's my thought.

JD 18:34

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time Lauren. Best of luck in the continuation of the school year, the end of things, and we will chat soon. Cheers.

LM 18:45

Bye.