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Mindy Wisman: Hello and welcome to Working Well, a podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country, discussing how to improve the wellbeing of the workforce. I'm Mindy Wisman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, or NCSSLE. In this episode, NCSSLE training specialist, Melanie Goodman, speaks with Dr. Patricia Jennings, professor of Education from the University of Virginia. They discuss elevating the profession of teaching and how implementing changes at a systems level can have a profound impact on the wellbeing of educators. But they begin their conversation talking about teacher burnout and what to do about it.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: A few years ago, my publisher asked me to write a book on teacher burnout. It was right around the time also that I was starting to hear feedback about the mindfulness and compassion based programs that I had been involved in developing, in that they're not enough, that it lays this burden on the teacher. And so I was thinking about that in the back of my mind while I was working on this book. And as I started working on it and looking at the more recent burnout literature, it dawned on me that nobody's going to want to read this book because the story is very depressing. And I thought, I've got to find a way of approaching this that has some hopefulness to it that doesn't lay the responsibility of burnout on the teacher that actually acknowledges and identifies the other stressors that teachers do not have control over, and gives teachers some way of addressing that. So that empowering them in a way that helps them see that not only is this experience of a broken system real and really creating stress for them, but there are ways in which they could address that systemic problem. It isn't putting the responsibility on them, but it's giving them some autonomy to think about it and to address it.

Melanie Goodman: And you had said empowerment, which I think is a whole reframe on this notion of responsibility, which I think is interesting.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Then I started looking at it from a systems perspective and it became really clear to me, if you think about learning and what we know about learning, the science of learning that has evolved and developed for the last mainly I would say 50 years, and you were going to create an environment that would optimize learning, it would be really different than the system that we have right now. Because in many ways the system we have right now actually interferes with the learning process.

Now, it is a combination of many big systems, because each school district is unique and has some autonomy to do the things that it wants to do, but it's also controlled at two different levels. It's controlled at the state level, and then it's also controlled at the federal level. So there's a lot of control mechanisms that

make it difficult to break out of the system and try things new. But the good news is because in the United States there is some local autonomy, there are some instances where schools are starting to break away from that mold and try different things. It's hard to get traction from those. Often they're charter schools, they're not part of the norm, but that is growing.

Melanie Goodman: So I'm just wondering how are or can research that you're working on, or others are working on contribute to this need?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: That's a really good question. There are organizations that are trying to support the autonomous teaching and learning processes that I think are really critical to our ability to shift, because we know from psychological research when the needs are met for autonomy, competence and relatedness, we are more intrinsically motivated and our wellbeing has improved. This all comes from the self-determination theory, and lately there've been some studies that have looked at self-determination theory in the context of teachers and teacher development. And what happens often in these cases, like the pandemic, teachers were given a lot of autonomy because they had to. They were teaching however they were, could do it, were using Zoom. They had to be really creative and innovative. On top of that, students were given more autonomy because they were at home. They could turn their cameras off if they didn't want to be there. So students had a lot more autonomy.

You go back to school and all of a sudden it's like, oh, we're supposed to go back to how it was, and these control mechanisms start to operate again. And what you see I think is students incredibly unhappy with having to go back to being controlled all the time, and teachers are feeling frustrated because they don't want to do that either, and they're feeling like the pressure's coming down on them. After having this autonomy and having been given to them and then having it taken away, I think that's why you're feeling this crisis right now. I think at this point teachers are like, I don't want to go back to that, and I think students are feeling that way too.

Melanie Goodman: So do you think that's why teachers are leaving?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: I think that's one, well, yes. When you're intrinsically motivated, when you love your job, you feel like you have the autonomy to support your students in the way that feels right to you and build the relationships with the students in the way that you know works best for you and your students, it's incredibly rewarding. It feels like you have a purpose. When you're told no you have to do it this way, and I think when you add on the layer of like now you can't talk about race, now you can't talk about gender issues, when all of that is laid on top of you and you're like, well, now if a student talks about this, I can't talk about it. If a student brings this in, I can't even address it, otherwise people will come down on me. That's another layer of control that teachers are like, I've had it.

The other thing is you don't make enough money as a teacher for that to compensate for it. In other professions, when it gets tough, people hang in there because, oh, well, I'm making good money, but for a teacher, you could make more money at Starbucks. So why am I doing this, you know?

Melanie Goodman: So what do you think? I know you're setting off to do some research, you started to say, of your own, but what else?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Well, first of all, I'm going on sabbatical in the fall to really explore this, because I feel like ...

Melanie Goodman: And this is what exactly, how would you frame it?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: How to give more autonomy in learning environments.

Melanie Goodman: Okay.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: How to support students self-directed learning and help teachers support students self-directed learning. And to do that, teachers need much more autonomy. So I'm looking for places where this is going on, and I have found an organization called The Human Restoration Project. It's an interesting name. They are doing projects all over the United States, but they have one going on in Michigan where they're going to start a school within a school. In a middle school, they're going to recruit half of the incoming sixth grade, and they're going to have a project-based student autonomous learning going on in that sixth grade, and they're going to see how it goes. And they've got four teachers they've identified that are going to be doing this.

There are going to be some individual classes, but most of the learning is going to be integrated, so the content area isn't going to be siloed. The students are going to have opportunities to direct their own learning in the ways that work for them. And so I'm really curious in this context. It gives us an opportunity to do a natural experiment because half of the sixth graders will be in the regular sixth grade and the other half will be in this sort of innovative self-directed program. So it'll give us a chance to see how that goes. Unfortunately, there's only four teachers in this project.

Melanie Goodman: Yeah, and are they teachers that are already in the regular system that are going to...

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Yes. They're already existing teachers that have volunteered because they want to do this. So yeah, it's not a perfect experiment, but it gives me the first step like a pilot and thinking through how might we change the system from inside? One of the things I also talked about in my book was when teachers realize that they do have a little bit more agents than they thought, or a little more leverage than they thought because of the teacher shortage. If I'm a teacher right now

and my state, which many, many states are having a crisis, I have more leverage. I can go to my principal and say, "Hey, I don't want to teach like this anymore."

The other thing that's very oppressive in schools is the time demands. You only have 40 minutes, maybe 50 minutes, to get through a lesson or a project, and that's not enough time for a lot of children. Children vary by the speed in which they process information, and so the way we do it assumes standard ways of thinking about things. And my experience has been sometimes kids need to focus on something for a really long time, and in that way they deeply learn something, especially if they're really interested in it. If a student is really keen on learning something and you give them a whole day, their learning is amazing. But if you try to chunk it up into 50 minute sessions over a month, you have to keep learning and relearning because you forget something you learned yesterday.

So whatever we can do to keep alive that motivation, that intrinsic drive to learn things, I think that's a really good thing. The system itself denies students that that even exists. It doesn't trust children to be self-motivated, doesn't trust teachers to support that process.

Melanie Goodman: On a positive note, maybe there has, and you mentioned it already, that because of the disruption during the pandemic, things kind of cracked open where just do whatever works kind of attitude, try this, and there was experimentation and some innovation. What do you think will be continued? What might stick around?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: I mean, what I'm hearing is that most of the reaction is going back to control, that in most cases, although there is a kind of desperation out there that I hear from school leaders that we've got to solve this problem, but when things are challenging difficult, the tendency is to go back to a system of control, which is kind of the wrong thing to be doing right now. It also depends on the resources that the community has. I think more well-resourced communities are more flexible and are trying different things. Places where there aren't a lot of resources, especially now as they're losing teachers and they're trying to fill in holes and they don't have enough personnel, that doesn't give them any wiggle room to try anything new because they're grasping for maybe marginally qualified people to do things in their school just to keep the door open, which doesn't lend itself to doing creative innovative things.

Melanie Goodman: So what do you think are some things that school systems could be doing right now in this context that you haven't maybe already mentioned in terms of trying to hang on to some of these promising approaches that we experimented with and kind of giving up a little control?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: The teacher profession needs to be further professionalized, and there needs to be a career pathway for teachers. Right now, if you're a seasoned teacher, you've basically hit a glass ceiling unless you want to become an administrator. But being an administrator is really different than being a teacher, is a really

different role. And in fact, I'm not sure teachers always make the best administrators. So if you haven't had in a school a cadre of these really senior teachers who could be considered mentor teachers who would support the growth and development of the newer incoming staff, rather than being in charge of their own class or maybe partially being in charge of a class, but also supervising, or let's say I was one of these mentor teachers, I could have a really new teacher with me who would learn alongside me, who would also be able to give me a break when I needed it.

Melanie Goodman: A bathroom break.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: So that you wouldn't feel like you could never take a break. Because the other part of that not being able to take a break is you can't tap out when you're having a challenging situation with a student when you know, "Look, I shouldn't be talking to this student right now, I've had it. Could you take over? I think you'd be better positioned to do that."

Melanie Goodman: And that doesn't happen now, with like ...

Dr. Patricia Jennings: No.

Melanie Goodman: At all.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: You don't have any way of doing that.

Melanie Goodman: With teachers, like student teachers in the classroom, or anything like that with a...

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Well, some teachers who are very smart realize that they need teacher neighbors to help them in these situations. For example, they'll send a student like that to the neighbor teacher with a note, and the note will say, can this student stay with you for a while? But I'm not sure that really is a skillful way of dealing with whatever the issue is. It's a way of avoiding it.

Melanie Goodman: It's not intentional either.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Yes, it's just like, get this kid out of my hair, I can't deal with it. It's not like meeting the actual needs of that student in that situation. So if you had these senior mentor teachers that could build these pathways where they could make, by the time they're at that level, over a hundred thousand dollars or something like a real professional salary, whereas the incoming teachers who start out at, I don't know, 40, would see they had a pathway that they could grow into. And if after a few years they realize, well you know, I don't think this is for me, or I do want to take the administrator route, I'll go that way, they have more options available to them, and they're seen as growing professionals rather than a stagnant role that is always controlled by this system.

This would also give schools an opportunity to experiment with other ways of teaching and learning because the senior people would have enough experience and understanding of student learning that they would know, okay, why don't we open up our timeframe here, we don't need these 40, 50 minute periods, let's rearrange our school time. If teachers are given some opportunity to take leadership roles in thinking through that as a community, if the principal and the superintendent allow them to have these conversations about how can we facilitate deeper learning here, we think the timeframe isn't working, we think that it's creating more stress, it's not helping learning. That would be one experience. That's an example of how they could be empowered and also further professionalized.

Melanie Goodman: Why can't that just happen? I mean, what's the obstacle to that? Is it just will? Would that be hard to institute in a school?

Dr. Patricia Jennings: That's a really good question, and I think that's a good question for a principal, let's say, because I think the principals are in a way stuck between a rock and a hard place because they are accountable to the superintendent, and the superintendent is basically has these certain expectations for them. The same time they've got all the demands coming from the bottom, depending on whatever district they're in and what kinds of mandates have been placed on them, they may feel like they don't have the freedom to experiment with these things.

However, I'll bet, and I'm not sure of this, but I'm betting that as this teacher shortage grows, the leadership's going to have to give them more capacity to recruit and maintain the kind of staff they want. And if the teachers can express this is what we need, this is how I think we need to be teaching and our students need to be learning, that people will listen because they'll see, wait a minute, if we don't shift, we're going to lose our teaching staff, they're just not going to do it anymore.

Looking at the system through a systems thinking lens, one of the things when you do that, when you take a system's perspective of educational environments, you see that this mismatch that I started talking about, because learning is a very dynamic system, it's very complicated, and there are many feedback loops that are complex and they vary by individual, by age, by developmental need in any particular point in time. They vary a lot across age even, or within age even. And this dynamic system has been sort of stuffed in this very linear mechanical system that doesn't work. So can we as school leaders start looking at ways like time, time is one variable in this mechanical system that you could easily, I say easily in air quotes, reform.

How about age? That's another one. Could we mix age groups? I know schools are experimenting with that. Having worked in a mixed age classroom myself, I know that in many ways when you have maybe an age band of three years or two years, you have more students that can help the younger ones so that the burden isn't on the teacher so much. So individualized learning is easier to

manage because you've got helpers. And when an older student helps a younger student, it reinforces their learning instead of reviewing something.

Melanie Goodman: Not to mention everything else it does for them.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Yes, absolutely. So here's two places. The way we structure time, the way we separate students by age. Another one that people I know are experimenting with is this siloed content. Can we see that social studies and language arts are actually natural partners. And I know this is happening in many places where the language arts and the social studies people are working together to engage students in learning in ways that reinforce one another.

When you do that, you start to see all of a sudden points of excitement where students can go, "Oh, I thought I hated math. I can apply math over here and it's really interesting." I think look at those variables, look at the system, the stagnant factory model system where there are barriers like time, like siloed content, like age differentiation, and also to add to all that, a real shift in understanding of learning as a intrinsic self-motivated process rather than an extrinsic fill their head with knowledge way of thinking. So that's a real shift that would be, I think necessary, ultimately to see the shift we want.

Melanie Goodman: That's right, and I would imagine much more gratifying for teachers to be in an environment where that was the intent.

Dr. Patricia Jennings: Oh, much more. You know, when you see children, and I've had this experience, when you're with a group of children and they are dawning on knowledge, when knowledge is like, they're all of a sudden going, oh my gosh, I get it, I understand something and I'm really excited about it. And sometimes it's not even anything that you planned, it just happens. It is the most rewarding. It is just thrilling to see children learn. Because when they are motivated and are excited about learning, it's really fun. I would say that when you can work in an environment where children are having these experiences regularly, it's probably one of the best professions you could have.

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