

Melissa Katz: Hi, everybody. My name is Melissa Katz and I am the host of the Collaborative's podcast EdVentures. And I'm really, really excited for our guest today. I have with me Dawn Campbell, who is one of the inaugural winners for the Jeannine King S.P.A.R.K. Award, which is an award that we established last year in honor of our beloved colleague, Jeannine King, who passed away. And S.P.A.R.K. stands for a special populations advocate, relationship builder, and knowledge sharer. And I know that those things were central to, what Jeannine brought to the work and honoring her legacy. I think central to your approach to education as well. So I'm really excited to be speaking with you today.

Dawn Campbell: Yeah, I'm so excited too. Hello, Melissa. Thank you for having me.

Melissa Katz: Of course. So yeah, let's jump into it. the A in S.P.A.R.K. stands for advocacy. How do you see advocacy playing out in your role as a teacher at your school?

Dawn Campbell: Well, I see advocacy playing out in my role in so many ways. I think the most formalized way is when I attend IEP meetings for students. And I help to ensure that they are being classified correctly by the Committee for Special Education and that they are receiving the appropriate services that they need and that they're not being underserved or over-served. I act as an advocate as well by partnering with families that sometimes have a hard time understanding that their children may need support. And so I work really hard to try to establish relationships with those families and to get them to accept that receiving support for your child doesn't mean that you're a failure, but it actually means that you love your child and that you want to make sure that your child is getting their needs best met.

And so I do a lot of that by again, building relationships in small ways and finding connections, but also sharing a lot of my own personal story because I have two children with special needs. And so I talk a lot from my experience as a parent and I let them know, I'm not just saying this as a teacher, because I want you to sign the papers. But I'm speaking to you from personal experience, and I know that early intervention and consistent intervention with a child that has special needs gives them better opportunities and also increases the likeliness that they will become more independent and that they will also have the ability to advocate for themselves as they get older.

Melissa Katz: You're sharing. There's like so much wisdom that you're sharing right now. And of course, like the R in S.P.A.R.K. stands for relationship building, which you already jumped into. a thread I'm hearing from your answer in terms of relationship building is bringing your authentic self making sure that you're doing that. And also. Almost like stating a shared goal. Like you love your child. I love your child. We want your child to thrive. You know, let's do this. Are there other things when, you know, we have a lot of newer educators listening to this podcast. What do you recommend for them as they're thinking about how to really build strong relationships with families and students.

Dawn Campbell: Well, I think that it's important to make families feel safe. And to make them feel like we're not judging them and not just connected to children with special needs and how

we support kids in those ways, but just in general, right? When parents come into the classroom and When they're given the opportunity to be vulnerable, we're not taking that information and using it against them, but we're using it as a stepping stone for building relationships, And we're understanding, okay, they've shared something really difficult with me. It was probably really hard for them to share that. Like, is it a cry for help? And how can I support in asking them? You know, you shared this, is this something you would like support with, or did you just need to vent.

And so realizing again, too, that parents many, many times when they have children, sometimes they lose their individuality and their life becomes very much centered around and intertwined with the life of their child, but reminding them that you too are an individual and you are a person. And it's okay to get frustrated, right? You're a human being. It's okay to cry. It's okay to have a bad day, No one expects you to be perfect every day. And being a parent is even more challenging when you have a child with special needs. So again, just, letting them know that you have compassion and that you empathize with them, and that sometimes even if your child is having a rough day, that isn't always a reflection of bad parenting. It isn't a reflection of you not teaching them something because children are individuals and they make their own decisions. Sometimes even when they have the best parents. And so it's like letting them know, do all that you can do. And then once that is done, sometimes you just have to let things be. So I think that that's important.

I tell a lot of my parents especially because all of my students have special needs, like make sure you have a me day, make sure you have like a down day, make sure you have a day where you are not thinking about your kid at all. And I tell them like, they're going to be there when you get back, right? You go to the spa. Go get your hair done, go out to dinner with a friend, you know, be a human, go vent, go talk, and find someone also that is going through the same thing that you're going through, someone that can identify with you, so that you can release some of that stress and help decrease some of that anxiety. So as an educator, helping parents to connect with one another, if you know there are similar parents in your classroom that might be going through the same thing, sort of helping them to form like a mini support group or some kind of relationships so that they can get through what it is that they're going through.

Melissa Katz: Yeah. Oh, that's so powerful. It's yes. Relationship building you with them, but also helping others build relationships with each other. Definitely. I know I asked that question with new educators in mind, but as a new parent, I felt like that felt like getting a hug.

Dawn Campbell: It's so important. We forget it so much. We forget about ourselves. And the truth of the matter is those children are going to grow up and they're going to have their own lives and they are going to put you on a shelf. And so you need to have your own identity for when they're gone. Right? You need to find a way to maintain that and have that duality. I'm a mom, but I'm also an artist. Or I'm also a singer or I'm also a chef, There's other things I enjoy doing. Love your child, but like, don't lose yourself. they can coexist, you as an individual and you as a parent.

Melissa Katz: And you touched a little upon this too, in your previous answer with knowledge sharing, it sounds like you're sharing a lot of knowledge with your families.

And I think a lot of people get into education because they love to learn. Or alternatively, sometimes it's, I struggle to learn and I'm now trying to support students. So the K in S.P.A.R.K. is knowledge sharing. So we've heard about how you're building relationships, particularly with families and really sharing your knowledge with them in support of their students. How else do you find knowledge sharing come to play in your work?

Dawn Campbell: I find knowledge sharing I think definitely directly with families when they're asking about what is the reason for particular recommendations that have been made by myself or my co-teacher. Or, the CSE. We talk about what is the scientific research around certain things and the need and what are the benefits, what are the pros and the cons of things. But also, I do a lot of knowledge sharing I think with my colleagues. In the same way that I mentioned that I think that parents should form alliances and support one another. I think that's really important for teachers too, especially when you're new teachers, but veteran teachers need it as well because we get tired.

And, there's so many new things coming out. So I think constantly talking to your colleagues and finding out what are the new things you learned about, right? Like, tell me about that PD you went to or you coming back from a PD you went to yourself and you sharing, like, I learned this really great thing, right? I didn't know this before. I didn't know that, if you talked about new vocabulary words with kids, this many times a day, Like how it helps to build this other part of them. So I think that's really important. We can't graduate from school and then for 25 years use the same thing that we learned when we got that degree like learning is an ongoing thing like you never arrive.

We're always learning. I think you should always be reflecting as an educator as a parent just as an individual, the world is always changing and research is ongoing, is always happening. And so, we have to be open to change and we have to be open to new things, especially if it's going to benefit our children.

We cannot be too stuck into things or stuck in the research, The research says this because then sometimes we have kids that don't always fit, the little mold that they're trying to be put into. You always have someone that doesn't fit and they don't follow the statistics. And so, I think being flexible, being reflective and being open minded and sharing. That's important.

Melissa Katz: And my last question to you, is, you know, Jeannine always used to start her trainings with a quote is on her, like introduction slide always, which is you know, true teaching is going to spark a desire to discover more like beyond what's something that's been sparking in you recently?

And it doesn't have to necessarily be a professional text, even though I know you just mentioned I'm going to work, we're talking to each other and We're perfecting our craft, right? Yeah. What's something that's sparked for you recently?

Dawn Campbell: Well, I definitely would like to begin my answer by saying Jeannine was an amazing human being. And I do remember that quote and I remember When I first began teaching at my current school in the Bronx and Jeannine was here and she was the director of student support and immediately forming this relationship with her and she basically asked that same question, Like, what is it that you want to do? How do you want to make your mark in special education? And at the time it was like supporting students with challenging behaviors like just trial and error finding things that work because I was trying everything in the books and the books were not working and I was like I must be doing something wrong and she was like nope you're not it's just this doesn't work for these particular kids, right?

And so either I have to look for something else or I have to invent something. Maybe that thing that they need hasn't yet been created. And so I think about that, 10 years ago. And now I fast forward to today where I sort of have, like, it's amazing, right? To think about the things that we struggle with, how once we master those things, we don't struggle with those things, but now it's a new, you know, what's my new goal, my new struggle. So I would say my new interest has been supporting children with autism of multi levels, because that is what I have in my classroom 95 percent of my students have autism, and many of them have dual classifications.

They might have autism and ADHD or autism and, another genetic disorder, autism and a mental health condition. And so trying to balance that and I think, some kind of research that I might be interested in doing one day and sharing with others is how to balance the very broad range of learners that exists within the autism umbrella and showing that like, it is possible, right?

For them to learn, for all of these students to learn and to learn in the same learning environment, and it takes a lot of work, right, but. It can be done. And I don't think that's something that last year I was very hopeful about because it was hard. Like, it took a lot of work but it's little things, little things that you see and you say to yourself, like, Oh my goodness, all of that work I've been putting into it, like it's actually, they've been paying attention, right? Like we've been doing numbers and colors for a really long time. And you have kids that are like, no, I don't want to learn that, or they don't want to talk. And now when you sit down and kids are sorting and they do it and they're like, yeah, this is yellow, or they're, matching the pictures or, they're trying to read the words.

And I'm like, wow. they can learn. It's just it's time, right? They needed time. They needed to build those relationships. And it's what you do in between that time. So we do a lot of social emotional curriculum. When the academics don't work, we pause. And we say, what is it that they need in order to get them ready to sit and do work?

And so it's a lot of community building, a lot of team building, a lot of just getting to know who these kids are and letting them build trusting relationships with us. And so that they get to know

that, that we care about them, right? Not just what we can get them to do, but we care about them in general.

And so we build that trusting relationship and they let their guard down and then they're like, okay. You've given me what I need. So now I can give you some of what you need. And they really enjoy it. I had a student the other day for the first time in a year and a half. She asked, Me to take her to the bathroom, and I was really excited about that, more excited than her being able to read words more excited than her being able to write her name, she trusted me enough to say, I have to pee pee take me to the bathroom, because before she would cry like that was hard.

But I didn't force her, right? I gave her time. I worked on building the relationship so that she would feel comfortable and let her guard down. And now she's doing both, right? She has those social pieces, but also she wants to sit down and do her work because she wants to make me happy. Because I took my time to make sure that she felt comfortable and she was happy. And so I think finding that balance, And talking about the importance of social emotional development and students and how closely connected it is to academic success and how we have to slow down sometimes, and we cannot focus too much on standards and, where the research says or what the book says, where our kids should be. But focus a little bit more like on who they are and what they need in order to be emotionally ready to be a student. Okay. And sometimes that takes time. It takes more time for some students than it does for others. And that's okay. It's okay. Because if we take the time to do that kind of relationship building and that building up of the child, like their inner person now, then we don't have to worry about trying to fix it later. When they're teenagers and when they're young adults. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and I love that you circled back to relationships. It is about making sure we're building those relationships with our students. And making sure they know that we care.

Melissa Katz: I have one last question. What song should we play as the outro to this episode?

Dawn Campbell: Well, I think about, I mean, with the ending of Black History Month and with Jeannine being a phenomenal Black woman, and I also consider myself to be that I think something like maybe Nina Simone, right? Like, I'm feeling good, something like that,

Melissa Katz: Well, Thank you for coming again. And thanks for listening, everyone. See you at the next episode.

Dawn Campbell: Thank you. Have a wonderful day.