AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

K-12 Teaching in 2020

Oral History Interview
with

Sheena Styles

By Sophia Nimlo

Virtual (Narrator in Maryland)

11/18/2020

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY:
K-12 Teaching in 2020

NARRATOR: Sheena Styles
DATE: 11/18/2020
INTERVIEWER: Sophia Nimlo
PLACE: Virtual

NARRATOR'S PERSONAL DATA
Birthdate: N/A
Spouse: N/A
Occupation: Elementary School Teacher (4th grade Math and Science)

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Sheena Styles works at a public school in Washington DC teaching 4th grade math and science. In this interview we discuss her early experiences with education, how she became a teacher. She discusses the significance of teaching demographics and how systemic shifts in DCPS have increased the amount of white women in teaching and reduced the number of teacher of color. She also discusses the kind of impact the national Black Lives Matter protests had within her classroom and the importance of anti-racist teaching practices. She tells her story of how the Covid-19 virus shut down her school, how the school addressed issues with equity, and the ways she has had adapt to teaching virtually. She shares her thoughts on teacher and student safety in the face of Covid-19 and the importance of teaching as a profession and the significant work teachers do within society.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

This interview was conducted virtually because of the global Corona Virus pandemic. There is a Background Journal entry for this interview.

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INDEX TERMS

Teachers, students, people, school, DC, teaching, community, kids, conversations, education, pandemic, classroom, equity issues, anti-racism, Covid-19, Corona Virus

K-12 Teaching in 2020

Transcription of Interview with Sheena Styles on 11/18/2020
At Virtual (Narrator in Maryland)

Sophia Nimlo 00:00
Today is November 18. And my name is Sophia Nimlo. This interview is being conducted online. I am in DC right now. Are you also in DC at the moment?

Sheena Styles 00:10
I'm in Maryland, but I'm in the DMV.

Sophia Nimlo 00:12
Okay, cool. And your name is Sheena Styles?

Sheena Styles 00:16
Yes.

Sophia Nimlo 00:16
Okay. And that's how you pronounce your name, right?

Sheena Styles 00:18
Mm hm.

Sophia Nimlo 00:19
Okay, cool. Okay— so I think the best place to start is just to get some background information about you personally. So can you tell me just a little bit about, like where you grew up, and your own sort of personal experience with education?

Sheena Styles 00:38
Oh, sure. So I was born in DC, raised in the DMV. I started out going to DC public schools. I then went on to go to school and eventually graduated from high school in Prince George's County. I have always had an interest in being a teacher, like as early as third grade. So when I moved to Maryland schools, you know, DC and Maryland had different schedules of when they were out of school. So on my days off in third grade, I would go back to help my— to assist my kindergarten teacher in the classroom. Both of my grandmothers were educators. And so it's just always just I've realized— I'm realizing more and more that's just a part of my legacy. And it's kind of in my DNA. Actually, my mom was telling me yesterday that my grandfather's great great grandmother started a school for enslaved— enslaved people in the country, and that just blew my mind. And so yeah, I would say— there

were other career— like as I got older, in college and stuff— I had considered other career options, but eventually, I landed back on teaching. And that's just sort of this— I've been involved in education since I have graduated—
what more than 13 years now? I've been an educator all in DC. And I am really just driven and motivated by I just see a need socially, I think that, you know, equity in education is one of our most pressing social issues. And so— I think, you know, kids, especially in segregated, underfunded communities, they need good teachers, people who care, who want to build community, want to provide quality education. And, yeah, that's what drives me and keeps me— in the field of education.

Sophia Nimlo 02:54
Great. That's awesome. Did you have like, so you obviously— family reasons really sort of drove a lot of your motivation to become a teacher. Would you say you had like, especially positive relationships with your teachers growing up?

Sheena Styles 03:10
Um, yes. So, I mean, again, going— oh, actually, maybe not again, I think I was just talking about my kindergarten teacher— Oh, yeah, I was. So my kindergarten teacher was incredibly, like, we were incredibly close. I mean, she— we have kept in touch all of these years like, she was at my college graduation, I probably talked to her like a couple of months ago. And I just remember— just— feeling really cared for, like, even if I wasn't able to articulate it. Even pre-K, I loved my pre-K teachers. I remember my pre-K teachers, I just have like, really vivid memories of my teachers. Um, I think, I may have had— I think, overall, honestly like, when I sit and think— I mean, other than — Well I guess when I got to college, I can think of like, some microaggressions. Like, I can remember being in the communications class, and one of my professors that pretty much asked me to speak entirely for the black community about, like— common nonverbal cues in the African American community or whatever. But overall, I've had a very positive education experience. Um— I mean, I think I look back now, when you get sort of, deeper into looking at the political, like, politics and policy that affects or impacts education. I can look back and say, Oh, my school was probably most definitely underfunded, or, you know, I was most definitely probably impacted by inequities when it came to certain resources and stuff like that. But I had really brilliant and amazing teachers who had a positive impact on my life.

Sophia Nimlo 04:58
In terms of the demographics like the schools you went to would you say they were really segregated or not?

Sheena Styles 05:07
Yeah, definitely. I would say, yeah, they were segregated. I can remember-- I mean, they were predominantly black, African American — There were, I think— I can remember like having some— peers, like elementary school who were latinx. Or, you know, there were like, sprinklings of white kids, but for the most part, I went to segregated Black schools.

Sophia Nimlo 05:40
Was this teaching staff also Black mostly? Or was it predominantly, like white women? You know, like, statistically, it's mostly white women in the teaching force, but--

Sheena Styles 05:49
Yeah.

Sophia Nimlo 05:49
—was that your experience?

Sheena Styles 05:51
That's a great question. I would actually say that it was mixed. I remember having a lot of African American—like, Black teachers. Um — I had, I mean, I definitely did have white teachers as well. But I would say, like, compared to when I was in school in DCPS, or MPG, where you did find that a lot of schools had a lot of Black teachers, I would think, like kids who are going to school in DC now are having a far different experience with the majority of their teachers are white females.

Sophia Nimlo 06:25
Do you have any insight into why you think that shift specifically has happened over time? Like, since when you were a kid?

Sheena Styles 06:33
I'm sure. I mean, I just think, you know— it just— Oh gosh, but I mean, the short answer, you know, gentrification and specif-- particularly in DC, I think— there were some shifts in terms of leadership. In particular, I think of Michelle Rhee, who, you know instituted things, and just put things in place that really got rid of a lot of Black teachers. And then you think about all of these programs that were "developed" (does air quotes)—and whatnot, I didn't mean to put quotes— but that were developed to better education. Right? And, a lot of those programs focus on recruiting white people who went to quote unquote, competitive colleges or institutions and that sort of thing, and it I mean, as you know, like, things are really complex—

and, things of that nature, but I think, partly it was because of a shift, and I think, partly it was by design. Um—and yeah, I don't— Did I— I guess did I answer the question?—

Sophia Nimlo 07:51
Yeah definitely.

Sheena Styles 07:52
—In my mind I feel like I'm kind of rambling.

Sophia Nimlo 07:53
No no no, that's great. Can you think of any, like specific— I mean, obviously, gentrification is a really specific example— But, like any other policy initiatives, specifically? If not, that's fine.

Sheena Styles 08:05
Not specifically, but I think of like certain programs, for example, like TFA. And, I think of, you know— different, like, evaluative systems that have been put in place as a part of the sort of policy initiatives. Or— standardized testing. And I think part of the idea is that, Oh, white people really do well on standardized tests. So let's bring in white people to teach, you know, Black children, Black and Brown children who don't do well on standardized tests. So I think that that's —you know that— that's the thing. I think that there was an idea— especially when, again, when you get into, like the time when Michelle Rhee came in where a lot of teachers in DC in particular, were Black, like they were Black women. Um— And so there was this idea that they weren't getting the job done, right? They weren't getting it done, so we have to bring in this other demographic to make things better, because they weren't getting it done. And I think that there are a lot of implications, you know, you see people who don't look like the demographic they are teaching, not teaching it, and I don't think that's problematic in and of itself. But I have in my own personal experience, seen— a lack of empathy, a lack of awareness for the stories, the— there there's a lot that comes with growing up and learning in an— in a city where poverty is higher when you come from a community that is under-resourced, underserved. And you know, students, kids are growing up black in America, like, let's be honest, all of those things, impact children. And so when they walk into the classroom, they're carrying all of these things, and I think, there are— the teachers that have been brought in, aren't—haven't necessarily always been sensitive to them. I think that there are some harms that comes along with— and I'm not saying that, by any means that that's true for all teachers— but, or white teachers, right? I think anybody who is aware and genu— and genuine, and genuinely dedicated to

educating all students, and does have good intentions or are in the profession for the right reasons, obviously, are valuable, but, yeah.

Sophia Nimlo 10:43
I mean, I think also like— it's also valuable, obviously, for students to see Black teachers as role models that they could aspire to grew up to be. And if they're not seeing that representation, that can be a huge problem, too. Can you tell me a little bit about your school now, specifically, like, what are the demographics and the sort of culture that you're experiencing?

Sheena Styles 11:07
Sure. Um-- so I work in a— school that is in a very affluent neighborhood, in DC, one of the few, it's very fully, well and fully resourced. Like we have every position that you could think of is fulfilled. We have a newly renovated building. We have all of the books that we need—probably more than what we need--like, teachers don't have to come out of their pockets to buy pencils and paper. And those sorts of things. But then, right-- there comes like, when I first started in my school--I've been there for about eight years now—I was — and the— I was one of the few Black staff members right? And at that time, there were only maybe like a handful, if that, of black or— the people who were working in the school, they were either like teacher's assistants, or they worked in the cafeteria, there were very few teachers of color, or other staff of color in the school. And that has since changed but then there's also been, you know, some things that have come along with that. And— yeah, we've had some experiences, we've made national headlines, and so for some— for incidents that have taken place at our school as it relates to, sort of, race and that sort of thing. We were— we were and we made national news, just last year, when uh— some students were completing a project and, you know, teachers actually didn't--Well students, you know, were play-- were portraying like slaves and slave masters and things of that nature. And, you know, obviously, just like other stories like that, that have made national news, it was a very harmful sort of experience for both students, teachers, as well as staff and other members of the community. But I think we've sort of had a— an awakening, as it's— it's that wasn't— that just started very recently, um, you know, as it relates to race and equity, and all those sorts of things. So—

Sophia Nimlo 13:36
That's a good transition point, actually. So were you— was school still in session when all the protests started, like in June? Or were you all out for the summer at that point?

Sheena Styles 13:48
We— No, we were still in school.

Sophia Nimlo 13:53
So what would you say the impact was, like, sort of immediately within your classroom and within the school community?— If anything.

Sheena Styles 14:08
I think, you know—There was a sense, I think, for Black people, right, like, Here we go again. Or just the sense that it's not really anything new, sort of thing. But we had already been having those conversations, right. Like, even before the protests started this summer, like DCPS had already instituted like, Black Lives Matter Week and there were also— We—DCPS—What, I think it's been the least three or four years now where they've made that commitment to equity. And so we've been having conversations, we've been having the difficult conversations, right, we've been doing the work as a staff and so— it was already on our radar. We had already been put— things had already been set up for us to have conversations when things like this took place. I think, when things happened in June—so we already had structures in place—so for example, our mental health team would hold sessions for us to come together and sort of just talk about things that were going on, our principal would just be very mindful of like, even if she said on email, like, Look, guys, I just I acknowledge that there's a lot of trauma taking place, and we're dealing with a lot of trauma, our students, our community. And so, there was always already this sort of awareness. But I think it just-- it just felt heavier, and I think people were just tired and frustrated. There was just a range of emotions, um, you know—amongst staff. But yeah, definitely. But I think this time felt a little different, right, because we were also dealing with the pandemic— pandemic. Um, I think it hit differently. Like, it wasn't new, but it kind of hit differently.

Sophia Nimlo 16:00
Yeah, I think I know, like in Washington, where we were teaching, the initiatives were not as thorough as DC schools, in general. So I feel like it was much more of like a reckoning kind of situation. But yeah, like, would you say that for people who may not have been as—not necessarily aware— but like, on board with making the necessary changes like that they were shifting at all within your school? Or, like, would you say that that was something that was kind of different?

Sheena Styles 16:35
I think so. But I think, you know, that was just happening globally, right? I think that there were people who were definitely like, Oh,

they didn't really get it. Right? Like they didn't really understand. And I do think— I do think that there were some shifts, I saw people speak up in meetings who may have not, may not have spoken up previously, or people who grumbled about, Ugh, why do we have to do this equity stuff? You know? I saw them engaging in a different way. Um-- I think — and even just talking to my students, right, like we would— the conversations that we would have say, for example, during my morning meeting or something— we would do like these emotional sort of just check-ins. Emotional, mental, I guess, sort of check-ins and, just hearing the things that they would say, you could tell that conversations were taking place at home— about what was going on in the world. They just seem really informed and to see, like, fourth graders, be so informed and have their own opinions and have really engaging, sort of open conversations about what's going on in the world was really— I wouldn't say that that was necessarily a shift. But again, it was—it felt good, right, to see. Because it's important.

Sophia Nimlo 18:03
Definitely, um, in terms of like your own personal teaching practice, like— I mean, how much are you talking about race with your students? Like, how normalized is that in your classroom would you say?

Sheena Styles 18:19
You know it's interesting because I teach math and science— particularly, and so— It's something, right, that kind of has to like— it, whereas if I was teaching like English or Social Studies or something like there's this natural sort of— I guess, connectivity, right? There are these natural sort of opportunities. And so, a lot— I think, for me, I would just be really transparent, like we would just take time out of the day, to start our day. Like, Hey, guys this thing happened. I know, you guys are talking about it. And you guys have feelings about it. Let's talk. And so, you know, it was really just more about me being intentional and setting the— creating the space— where it wasn't necessarily as— I guess, easily available in terms of instruction, right? And so— but I do find that I'm still kind of trying to navigate that, right? Like, um— I—Yeah, it's tricky. But I think for me, the biggest thing has just been about like, Look, let me just call a lot out, call it out, say what it is. For example, when the incident happened, where the students were portraying themselves as slaves and slave masters and it was actually the students who were really harmful about it. And they brought it to the attention of adults like, Hey, this thing happened. And so I knew my students were already talking about it, and so I didn't avoid it. I wanted them to know— that it was something — I think, you know, because there's a culture, right? Like, we don't talk about things that are uncomfortable, we don't, and there's—

especially at Lafayette, oh well yeah. Especially at my school where, you know, it's predominantly white, so they didn't really have to talk about those issues because it was a comfortable suburban sort of reality. And it's like, those are those issues there—that, you know, and so— Yeah, I think just, I've just made it my business to be just really transparent. And I guess in any way that maybe if I'm sitting there, or having a conversation with my friends, like that sort of thing, right, like, Guys, let's talk about what's going on in the world, sort of thing. This is a safe space, we can talk about it, we can share our feelings, we can, you know, state our opinions and that sort of thing. So—

Sophia Nimlo 20:58
Yeah that makes a lot of sense. I feel like it is really hard when your subject matter doesn't fit in the same way. But sort of going off of that, like what would you say, just in your opinion, is sort of teachers responsibility to have these conversations like regardless of subject matter? And also regardless of like, your classroom demographic, like if you're a teacher who works at a school that is very segregated, and almost exclusively white, like, what is your responsibility in terms of doing this work? Do you think?

Sheena Styles 21:28
Mm—(sighs) You know, is interesting, because like—and I guess we could say, you know, obviously, as a Black woman-- who considers herself like— considers herself very conscious and aware of what's going on, it's not really optional for me whether or not I discuss it. And I know that comes up in conversation, or like, I don't have the option of whether I talk about Black Lives Matter or race, or segregation, or inequity, like, these things are a part of every— like, I have to think about them every day. And so for me, it's not really a matter of *if* it's a matter of *when, how best to*. And I think, for me, I feel like it's my duty, as an educator, I don't—just—teach. Like, I teach, and I nurture the whole child, that's my intention, right, and so, students come into the classroom with all aspects of their being, right, social, emotional, mental, and I think that our social realities impact them, all of those aspects, and all of those elements of their being. And so frankly, I think white, Black, segregated or not, I think teachers have a duty and an obligation to— I mean, right? Because one of the big things we're supposed to do as teachers is connect to real world situations. So it's hard for me to imagine, you know-- meaningful instruction that doesn't connect to our current realities.

Sophia Nimlo 23:31
That makes sense. I'm trying to think like, how to phrase this question. I guess, like—Well, actually I'll ask something else. Do you—

Do you have like security officers at your school? I'm assuming probably not, right? But I obviously don't know for sure.

Sheena Styles 23:57
We do it looks very different from you know (laughs) what I've seen in other schools. So I've taught in—the poorest wards of DC and I'm now teaching in one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest, ward in DC. And so we do but they're really just sitting at a desk, making sure that visitor sign in. There are no metal detectors, they're not walking around, like— or sitting in the hall anticipating breaking up a fight or stopping a student for not being in class. It's really just this sense that they're just, you know, members of the community and they're here because we need them, it's a very positive— their presence doesn't, provoke— I would say, for the most part— a negative response. I think they, for the most part, people will say, Oh, they make us feel safe like they're here they're just— Whereas, you know, in other schools that I've worked in they're there making sure you put your stuff through the metal detector, they're monitors in the halls. "Hey, where are you supposed to be?" That it's a very sense that they're there to police. So yes, we do we have one. And I think they just kind of switch off but they're really just sitting at the visitor's desk. And— actually we have two. So one sits at the visitor's desk. And then the other is just kind of there monitoring, making sure that nobody's coming in through our doors and stuff of that nature.

Sophia Nimlo 25:35
Protecting people coming in rather than trying to like police, the actual children.

Sheena Styles 25:40
Exactly it's for protecting us from any harm that may be, yeah—

Sophia Nimlo 25:43
Yeah. And was that I'm assuming that's not really the vibe that it was that other schools that you were at?

Sheena Styles 25:49
No.

Sophia Nimlo 25:50
Yeah. Okay. And then just generally, what, how do you feel about like SROs? Just the general system, like, do you think that they can be necessary or not? You know, I mean, it's a complicated issue, but I don't know.

Sheena Styles 26:05

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think-- especially in the age that we live I mean this—the age of—the era of mass school shootings, right, like, definitely, I feel safer knowing that they're there. And I do—I do think that, yeah, you can have— I mean, despite the history of policing, you know, why they were created and things of that nature— I think yeah, I think that they can be a positive resource, positive members of a school community. But, I also, like you said, it's complex, it's complicated, right? Because, I mean the reality is, like, I've worked in a school where kids have brought guns into the school. And, you know — it's— it's no easy answer, but I think the goal should—in every school— should be that they are there for protection and not just— policing or to keep people, children in particular, in line. Or seen as a punitive figure, but it should be seen as some other person who is adding value to the community.

Sophia Nimlo 27:34
And then what, what are your opinions on, like, restorative justice practices versus sort of like, typical discipline? Do you think restorative justice actually works? Is it better or, I mean, I know people that think that it's not actually productive, and it doesn't actually have the impact p— (inaudible)

Sheena Styles 27:56
I don't have a great deal— just because of our demographic—a great deal of first hand experience with it. I've read things about it. I've heard people share their stories on say, NPR or something, so— It does seem to work. I like the intention, right? Like I kind of— it kind of, it makes me think of, right, like different approaches to-- let's say drug— let's say drug addiction, right? Like, there's this one--or there's this one approach where you lock up people who are struggling with drug addiction. And then there's another approach where you provide resources, and you encourage people to deal with their addiction in a productive and healthy way. So, I think restorative justice, I think it has that intent, right? Like to be this approach that is restorative, that is uplifting, that it allows for—I hate to say rehabilitation, when it comes to kids—but for lack of a better word it's more geared towards rehabilitation or rebuilding the community, strengthening the community, giving students the resources that they need to shift, and to create change within themselves and within their community. So I mean, I think that there's value to it—again, I also don't have firsthand experience with it—but I also do have the perception that they are mixed reviews about it.

Sophia Nimlo 29:37
Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, to shift gears just a little bit— Well, kind of dramatically— Not that things aren't all interrelated in

teaching. But specifically the pandemic like can you— when did you first hear about COVID existing and how concerned were you about it when you first heard

Sheena Styles 30:02
Um— Gosh. When was that? Was it like December or January when I feel like it really started, like hitting the news? It's kind of all— Yeah. When I first heard about it felt like this very isolated thing, right? Like, it was something that was happening in China. And so, and I've heard of outbreaks around, excuse me, around the world before. So honestly, I didn't really think of it necessarily as something that had the potential to impact— in the way that it has, particularly in America. So, yeah, that was your question when I first heard of it, right?

Sophia Nimlo 30:49
Yeah.

Sheena Styles 30:50
Okay yeah.

Sophia Nimlo 30:50
And did you hear about it from the students. Like, I know, I learned about it from my students. They were talking about it before anybody else really.

Sheena Styles 30:58
No, I heard about it. I think, I mean, I always listened to NPR. So I think I just heard about it like on NPR, heard them talking about it.

Sophia Nimlo 31:07
Yeah. And then, can you just tell me like, just sort of walk me through like your experience of when schools closed, or what— how your school responded when things got really serious?

Sheena Styles 31:20
Sure. So I remember there being a shift, right? So it was like this thing. And again, my students and I we talk about everything. So if they're talking about it, we talked about it, and I've usually typically— I hear rumblings, so if I hear them mention like, Oh COVID or whatever I'll just— I'll just open the floor, and we'll have a discussion about it. I do remember there being a shift, right, like I can remember feeling like, Oh okay— and then at some point, I started to hear Oh, there are cases in the US, right? And I can remember, we had fall break. And I actually traveled to California, and then as soon as I came back, my— my aunt sent my mother, this link saying that there

were the first recorded cases of COVID in San Francisco, which is where I had just left. And so I was like, Huh. And then I just remember it getting to this point where I was like, Okay, guys— I started making sure hand sanitizer was on every table, and I started being like, "Okay, guys, make sure you're washing your hands, let's make sure— let's remember those good hygiene practice— practices, let's make sure we're using tissues, sanitizing after." So I kind of just amped up like, things that were already in place. And then I remember— it got to a point— because I greet my kids and like, they can either like high five me, hug me or just wave or whatever in the mornings when they enter class— And so I just remember it getting to a point where it was like, "Okay, guys, like elbow to elbow," right? And then— there was this point where my student— people were starting to get nervous about it. And my students were getting nervous about it and they were talking about it. And then-- and I remember, in particular a lot of my students saying they were really concerned about their grandparents, because the news was saying that it was—it had a harder effect—impact—on older people, right? And so I remember those conversations taking place. And then— it just, yeah, it just seemed like we were preparing quickly to send students home for at least a couple of weeks. Did I answer all of your questions?

Sophia Nimlo 33:35
And then so did you— You sent them all home for a couple of weeks, did you go online for virtual teaching immediately, or was there like a sort of trying to figure things out?

Sheena Styles 33:48
Yeah, so we sent them home with materials, like a couple of books and stuff. And then— Oh no, we sent them home, we make sure every student had a laptop. You know, that sort of thing. Like we did this survey to see what students would need and then—we that next week —we were supposed to have like a spring break soonish. So they moved up our spring break, but it really wasn't spring break because that week— that first week that we were out— we had professional— Well no, we had meetings and they were telling us that we were going to transition to virtual or something and then we were supposed to have spring break that next week, but really it was just us like, trying to figure out, Okay, what's going to happen with it, you know, staying tuned. And then I think on that third week, we went virtual via Teams.

Sophia Nimlo 34:51
—Disappeared. I can still hear you. So I think we're fine. But—

Sheena Styles 34:54

Yeah.

Sophia Nimlo 34:55
I don't know where you are. Um— Yeah. So you were on Teams pretty much immediately. So your school had a survey for materials, though, when it started. Was that like a district wide thing or just your school?

Sheena Styles 35:12
That's a great question. I'm not sure. I mean, again, we work— it's a very affluent neighborhood, like it's safe to assume all of the kids had devices. But well, yeah, we actually surveyed the kids. Like, Do you have a computer at home? So the kids just did like a quick little, Do you have a computer that you can use at home? And then any students who didn't, they were given a device to use. I'm not sure if it was DC wide.

Sophia Nimlo 35:41
I was wondering, just in terms of like district equity. And then just on the equity line, like if your school is pretty affluent, then that isn't necessarily as much of a concern. But do you know if there were any district initiatives for like food resources or anything? Like how aware are you of what was happening in that (inaudible)

Sheena Styles 36:01
They were— the schools were open, so kids could go— certain schools were open. Our school— our school, I believe—I do not believe was— actually I don't know. So let me not speak on that— But yes, DC schools were still providing meals to families who might have needed meals I think there was like a certain time slot where you can go in and get food.

Sophia Nimlo 36:25
Oh okay, yeah, that makes sense. So in your school, it seems like equity in terms of resources, wasn't a really significant issue. But in terms of like, families being able to support their students learning, like, did you see a drop off in student achievement or any—

Sheena Styles 36:51
Um, so I want to say it wasn't an issue. Definitely like, even— there are students whose family aren't as affluent. And so, I think that there were definitely certain issues there. But even with our demographic being the way it is, right, like, I think our school— you know, so on the one hand, like parents—on one part, there are families, right, like, who are essential workers, like in other schools a lot of those parents are essential workers, so they're working. And so I did have students who were sort of struggling to be engaged. And so I would reach out

to a parent and like, Oh, you know, I'm working all day, so I can't be home to monitor them. And then you had parents who were maybe too involved in what their kids were doing like in the background, whispering answers and things of that nature. And, or who were too busy at home to help their students with—with work, so I think that I mean, there were a number of challenges may—certain challenges, certainly not as great as in other schools in the city. But yeah, well, there were definitely some equity issues that we had to address.

Sophia Nimlo 38:13
Yeah, that makes sense.

Sheena Styles 38:14
Mm hmm.

Sophia Nimlo 38:16
In terms of like, planning over the summer, did you see— I know, in the district where I was working before, they like, wanted to go back in person, and so they really didn't plan to go back online. But— did you have like a specific plan laid out so that you could transition smoothly into being online again, in the fall? How did that work with your school?

Sheena Styles 38:43
There was—um— like we had some trauma informed professional development. So on the idea, I think we were under the impression that we would be at least somewhat virtual, but there was also a possibility there would be in-person teaching as well. So-- I mean— And it was kind of like, Okay, stay tuned, but I'm gonna make sure you have access to some training on these platforms, like Teams and all of that nature. But there was still no, like, solid sense of what the plan was for the upcoming school year. Over the summer, like it was kind of still on the fence.

Sophia Nimlo 39:37
Yeah. I mean, I think it sort of has to be a little improvisational at this point. So just on like, a daily basis, what— Can you sort of walk me through like your day now, like teaching the way that it's going in the fall?

Sheena Styles 39:54
Sure. Um, so every day starts with a morning meeting, a 30 minute morning meeting, which, you know, is just a time for us to connect and build community. So we have like three elements to our morning meeting, we have a greeting, so every student gets greeted, we have some time for sharing out, I might--I do this thing where I ask them a

random question of the day. And so when they come in, they'll respond in the chat, and then we do an activity. Just to, again, build community, team building as well. And then we have small group instruction. So right now I have—I have two classes that I teach two sections of my class. And so there are three groups in each and so each group meets with me for twenty-five minutes in small group, there's a five minute break in between. So for the first class, meet with those three groups, 10 minute break, and then I have— I meet with the next three groups from the second class. We break for lunch and recess. And then in the afternoon, we have a very short like social studies/science time. Oh, they also have specials— after lunch and recess, so they go to like art or music or peace, we have peace class at our school. And then they— we come back together for science. And then our school has clubs and stuff as well available.

Sophia Nimlo 41:30
Is this, like being done virtually? Are you all back in person at this point?

Sheena Styles 41:36
Oh, I'm sorry. No, it's all virtual. We're all virtual.

Sophia Nimlo 41:39
And then, like, how much of a burden is that on you as a teacher to do it virtually?

Sheena Styles 41:45
(laughs) Oh, my God. I've never worked harder in my life. Like—every day almost feels like an all-nighter it takes me back to like, trying to meet deadlines in college, it's just, I'm exhausted. Um, but you know, right, it's necessary. I'm also learning a lot about various platforms, I feel like it's definitely making me a stronger, more knowledgeable teacher. And I'm just learning so much that I feel like it's going to enhance my practice. That is enhancing my practice now, while we're virtual, but also, once we return to the classroom, I'm excited to see how I'll be able to maneuver— maneuver and utilize these things, to make my instruction more effective and meaningful. I'm sorry, my window, just don't know. Okay, there we go. Um, but yeah, it is a lot, a lot, a lot of work. I think, you know, when I speak to my colleagues, I'm like, Oh, my gosh, I'm just so exhausted. I'm so tired. Rarely, I don't think it's actually I don't think it's happened yet where they aren't like, "Girl I know." Like, so we're all in it together. (laughs)

Sophia Nimlo 43:02
And then how are the students responding? Do you think that they're like, adapting well? Or is it really challenging for them too?

Sheena Styles 43:14
I think it's challenging, it's hard, like, we would all prefer to be— I think many of us well, you know, we prefer to be face to face, it's just simply not the same, right? Like—and this is different, because last year, I had already had in-person interactions with my students this year, we're starting completely virtually. So that was different and it— and new. So that was an adjustment in and of itself, right. Like, none of us have ever started a school year, just virtually. And so but I think my students are adjusting well. You know, obviously, there were a lot of tech issues and adjustments and students who was having to figure out how to best utilize their devices, and which assignments work best and all of those things, but I think, at this point, I'm kind of catching a groove and I think they're getting a groove and we're still trying to figure out what works best. Um— and how we can maximize instruction and things that nature but I think we're adjusting well. For the most part, there are some students who are still— and families— who are still having a really hard time. But in large part, it seems like most people are adjusting well.

Sophia Nimlo 44:35
Yeah, that makes sense. For families, like who need to work or you know, that kind of thing. What, like, what do you see as something that they can do to be supported? Is there anything that's being done to help them or is it just kind of like when they can have their kids be there, they are there, that kind of thing?

Sheena Styles 45:01
Yeah, so we have, we have staff and there're the counselors on— in particular, they are, like, directly responsible. So if we have students that we think might need, like additional support, or families that we think may need additional supports, we sort of connect and collaborate with them. And they connect with families to make sure that they have what they need. So for example, like you said, I had a mom who worked and hers— who has to work and hers involves traveling, like, she's in hair— she's a hairstylist, and she travels. And so, it was a huge--and it's still an issue— but it has, it's been an issue having her child get online consistently. And so she had already had a report with the counselor as well. So we were able to— she expressed her needs— and so we were able to swap out the device that they were originally given and then give them a device that had built in Wi Fi. I also make time— set aside time to meet with her, so she understands how to use the various platforms, how to see assignments, how to make sure he knows— her child knows— where to go, and that sort of thing. So, yeah, we definitely have resources in place to support families as much as we can. I mean, even our school

has set up sort of like grants and sort of, yeah, scholarships. Even last year for service workers. Our HSA put together a fund to help support them while they weren't working.

Sophia Nimlo 46:43
That's awesome. And then, just like— there's all of these, obviously, like news opinions and everything about teachers, how schools should reopen safely, and that needs to be a priority. Do you think that like, it's possible to go back safely in person? And would you be supportive of that? Like, what is your opinion on that issue?

Sheena Styles 47:09
Right now, my honest answer? No. Um (laughs) I mean there's all this — again, this is a novel virus, right? Like, and even with the things that do come out in the news, we're still learning about this virus, we're still navigating, I mean— and if I were just to go based on my observations and my experience, right, like, even just looking at, Oh okay, so we were shut down, and then we reopened bars and restaurants and schools and things of that nature. And there's a surge, right? Like— and so there's a part of me that's like, Yeah, would I love for that to be possible? I would love to return to the building like it simply is not the same. I miss my students being able to collaborate, I miss being able to look over my student's shoulder to make sure that they understand what's happening, You know, or how to do a particular problem or perform a particular skill. But I don't feel safe returning to the building. Especially, we are such a large school, our school— actually before this year, because we lost almost about a hundred families— But our school is almost a thousand—has almost a thousand students. Like, how are we going to return safely? And then I even have questions about like, Oh, well, will it be effective? Like, I was listening to NPR the other day, and they were just saying, I mean, it's basically because you can't collaborate, right? Like you can't get together in small groups, like the way that you normally would. When you talk about the whole day is basically like partner work, and group work, and collaboration. And so it concerns me like how that would look. And if we are in the building, how meaningful will it actually be like, yeah, we can say, Okay, there's in-person instruction, but how meaningful and furthermore, how safe will it really be? I mean, kids need to socialize, they miss their friends. And I just feel like, it may be this thing of like, "Oh okay, guys, like, please put your masks back—" Like, I don't know, it's just, we're talking about elementary kids like not high school kids. So—

Sophia Nimlo 49:34

Feel like kids are just not— (laughs) it's pretty much like the worst possible environment for a pandemic to be— trying to be contained. I think.

Sheena Styles 49:43
Yeah I mean, look at the college students. We've heard those stories on the news where they're back and they're partying like they can't, even control themselves to that degree. So—

Sophia Nimlo 49:52
Yeah. My sister's— my sister is actually at Stanford Law and she said they, the new students in the year below her all got in trouble because they were like partying after having to sign a whole thing about safety. So I really don't think like nine and ten-year-olds can handle it. If—

Sheena Styles 50:08
Exactly.

Sophia Nimlo 50:09
—College kids can't. All right, so we're almost out of time, but I wanted to end on like a sort of a positive note. So, I mean, obviously, you're very passionate about teaching, but like, what would you say is your favorite part about being a teacher? And what is it exactly that like, keeps you in the job, even when things are so you know, burdensome.

Sheena Styles 50:40
I mean, I really felt like I'm doing what it is that I'm supposed to do, which, um—you know, it just feels like— it just feels very right, it just feels very me. In particular, I love teaching math like--Well let me go back— I just I enjoy children, I'm fascinated by their development, I'm fascinated by how their brains work, I'm fascinated by their curiosity. And just being in an environment where I am constantly exposed to that it feels— it feels like an honor. Because it's just so— yeah, enjoy— I'm just fascinated by their development and sort of their being-ness. And so, yeah, but then I also, I just really enjoy math. I actually moved up, just— this is my second year teaching math only, science only. And I just really enjoy it, I really enjoy hearing and seeing how kids make sense of numbers, and— just seeing how they grow and learn from the beginning of the year to the end. And, I just think teaching is important, education is important, I think teachers have a really, really—even important or significant seems really small —I think we— we're really meaningful members in society. And I just feel really honored to be able to impact people and children in the way that I do.

Sophia Nimlo 52:37
Cool, I feel like that's (laughs) the perfect answer. And then the last thing is just, is there anything that I didn't ask that I should've, or anything that you want on the record that hasn't come up?

Sheena Styles 52:49
I think one thing that really— because I—as a teacher sometimes it's hard to—I have felt that our position is undervalued, I have felt that we— teachers aren't as supported as they need to be. I feel like, teachers have been the scapegoat for a lot of things that are wrong with our educational system. And I saw a shift in the perception of— the perception that people have with teachers. I feel like this pandemic has created this space—or created this space that has deepened people's perception of what it is that teachers do every day. And that has led to an increase in the appreciation for what we do and what we contribute to students' lives, families' lives. And just the general sort of ongoings of our society, like, what would the world be without teachers? And so I hope that that leads to— continues to lead to meaningful reforms and policy shifts, and changes, because it's very necessary. And I know we've heard that going on, I think, the pandemic has just created a space where people really have to just sit and look at structures and institutions and systems and really take a critical look, and a really deep look at how things function and how people are impacted by the things— the things that we currently have in place and how we can improve them. And so that for me has been really, really meaningful. Like even though it's so hard right now, I think that there are some meaningful things that are coming out. I like the way people are thinking I like the conversations that people are having. And I like the ideas that people are coming up with to make improvements, make changes that needed to be made for (laughs) who knows how long?

Sophia Nimlo 55:12
I mean, that's a really big reason for why I want to do this project too. So I'm just so grateful that you could participate and help me with this. Because I think, you know, teachers with the protests AND the pandemic, like, there's so much— where teachers are put at the center of all of these things. And now people are really registering that that is the reality, you know, like teachers and education is essential for helping society function. And then even like anti-racism, like it—schools are such an essential place for making that happen. But I feel like, nobody is really talking to the teachers, like there's so many articles about all of these issues, and nobody's actually asking teachers opinions. And so that was really one of the reasons why I wanted to do this.

Sheena Styles 55:55
Yeah.

Sophia Nimlo 55:56
But yeah, I mean, unless there's anything you won't you have—

Sheena Styles 56:00
But that's nothing new. Right?

Sophia Nimlo 56:02
Yeah.

Sheena Styles 56:02
That's really nothing new. I mean, when you think about social change, right, like and the people who are really fighting for social change, they don't necessarily have a seat at the table, like a part of the fight is actually having a seat at the table. Part of the fight is actually having the powers that be listen to what they're saying that they want in me. So, yeah, I mean, there's that as well. So—

Sophia Nimlo 56:31
Totally true. All right. Well, I am going to stop recording.