

Episode 21: Career Pivots for Teachers with Daphne Williams

Elyse: [00:00:00] Daphne, welcome to the show. I'm excited to talk to you today and find out more about your career journey and what you're doing with your Teacher Career Coach Podcast.

Daphne: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to talk to your audience and just be on your show.

Elyse: So I want to start with what you were doing previously. You mentioned you were a teacher. What got you into teaching? What grades did you teach? What was the beginning of your career?

Daphne: Yeah. So I think that this is a very common story. I always like to say, tale as old as time. My mother was a teacher and I always felt like I had like a passion for teaching just because I went into the teaching stores with her. And I saw the borders on the stickers as a little kid and I loved education.

So I was starting to identify what my forever career was going to be. I reflected back on things that I wanted and I valued in a career choice and I'm very intrinsically motivated and I wanted to do something that felt like it was having a positive [00:01:00] impact on my community. And so reflecting from those things thinking, oh, I like being creative and I like some of the teaching aspects.

I think that teaching is the right choice for me. And so I started going into teaching as a profession, even though at that point, it's still kind of felt a little bit unsure in my head.

Elyse: What did you end up teaching?

Daphne: I taught fifth grade, but at two very different school districts, I started teaching a very low income school in my hometown of Bakersfield, California. I worked with students that were from a variety of really tragic home situations.

Some of them were homeless, many students who are really struggling and under grade level. And then I moved to a fifth grade classroom in Burbank. And I actually taught the gifted and talented program and had student actors and a completely different change, but overall, just always fifth grade.

Elyse: So you did that for about four years. When did you start thinking like, oh, okay. I thought this [00:02:00] was maybe the career for me, but now I'm kind of thinking maybe this isn't the career for me. What put the seeds of doubt in your mind?

Daphne: Almost immediately, even that first year of teaching, I realized that I was burnt out and I didn't feel like myself. And I started to reflect on like, why am I so overwhelmed? And

I'm not happy on my days off during the summertime, even that very first year, but what they always chalk it up to is first year jitters, and by the second year, the third year it's going to get better.

So I just kept waiting and waiting for it to get better. And after two years in that first school district, I thought, I just need to switch districts and find someone who maybe it has a different value system than the administration that I was working with at the time, maybe I'm looking for a different work-life balance and the next place is going to be a little bit better.

And once I moved to the new school district, things actually got much worse for me. And I found myself at an even more toxic environment. And I started to reflect [00:03:00] on whether or not this was the right career path for me in general, just because changing the environment really didn't shift how I was feeling about it on a day to day basis.

Elyse: Yeah. You mentioned a couple of things there, and if you're comfortable, I want to dig into that a little bit. So you mentioned the work-life balance piece and you mentioned kind of a toxic culture. Can you talk a little bit about the work-life aspect of it to start with?

Daphne: So both school districts had completely different sets of expectations. And both of them felt like a lot of extra work being placed on the teacher, but without any financial incentives and the second school district that I was at, the one that really sealed the deal for me, the work-life balance was the expectations were set where you were working weekends long.

You were coming in early, you were staying late. If you got in at 7:00 AM, even if it wasn't until 8:00 AM that you need to be there. And if you left at 4:00 PM, even though you technically could leave at 3:15, there were a [00:04:00] lot of glances and comments made about whether or not you were working hard enough or whether or not you were doing your job.

And so I felt a lot of pressure and there was a really bad environment at that specific school, specifically from the administration that I needed to be in my classroom, Saturdays and Sundays, not saying yes to going to like friend's birthday parties and I needed to be working above and beyond because I was being constantly watched.

Whether or not, I was actually doing my job and there was a level of distrust with the administration and the employees always kind of dangling that over their heads of whether or not they were working hard enough on behalf of the children.

Elyse: That's so interesting. I feel like a lot of times, when you think about teaching as a career, you think of like, oh, I get the summers off. Or like, I can leave at three o'clock every day. And it's really interesting to hear that that wasn't the case.

Daphne: [00:05:00] Many of the times you have to take home school papers, just a grade, you know, all night long, sometimes it's on the weekends.

And that's something that many teachers say that they're struggling with leaving because of the summers off. And what I had found was during the summer, I was actually so anxious and burned out that I wasn't enjoying that time off. I was just having an extended period of the quote unquote Sunday scaries, where I was just sick.

So the stress level there was a lot more intense than what people may perceive outside of education.

What they see is cute activities and their students are enjoying the book that they're reading, but depending on the school district and the school district environment, there can be a lot of unhappiness on the teacher's behalf that aren't really showing that to other people.

Elyse: I think like anything, it's so dependent on the culture and the expectations that are set by management, essentially.[00:06:00] Was there a specific moment or experience that kind of was like the straw that broke the camel's back for you?

Daphne: Not necessarily.

And I think that this is something that's probably really common with human nature is our brains are so scared of any sort of change. Even when we know that it's positive, that I was bending over backwards to try and make this situation fit, even though it was not a good fit. So I remember in December of that last school year, going home and visiting some friends and them asking how the school year was, I maybe I had a couple of glasses of wine and I just broke down crying and said,

I hate it. I hate where I'm at. I hate this environment. And that was one of the first times that I ever really realized how truly unhappy I was in that situation. And from December on, I would start crying on the way to school. It sounds so overdramatic, [00:07:00] but that's just how much pressure I was under at that one school environment that I would be breaking down on the way to school bawling and towards the very end of the year I started to look for other jobs and I realized I can try and move districts again, but I am just so jaded and burnt out. So I'm just going to try and find anything else for at least one year. I'll have my teaching credential, I'll get my mental health back and then I'll be able to go back into the classroom, refreshed, rejuvenated if that's what I choose to do.

And that's kind of where my mindset was at when I started applying for other jobs, I did not 100% know that I was giving it up altogether.

Elyse: I can totally understand that. And by the way, it doesn't sound overdramatic. I think it just sounds like a symptom of a very, very toxic work culture.

So you said that you weren't ready to necessarily give up teaching period at that point, but you knew you had realized that you were very unhappy. So what did you do? How [00:08:00] did you start going about exploring other options?

Daphne: So this was back in 2017. And my very first thing that I did was a Google search for other jobs for teachers. I couldn't figure out what I was planning on doing.

And I started to find customer education jobs, and I was like, I could probably do that. And so I would apply and I wouldn't hear it back. And then I would find jobs that had the word learning in it. And I'm like, okay, these are couple of the search terms that I could find. And I eventually, after two and a half of the longest months of searching and not knowing what I was doing as far as job search strategy, when I ended up landing a green role as a educational consultant for a Fortune 500 company.

Just doing free professional development for teachers and school districts and speaking at national conferences on my client's behalf and just helping teachers implement technology [00:09:00] into their classrooms.

Elyse: You say searching, do you mean that you were applying to jobs on job boards or were you doing informational interviews? I'm just curious about some of the tactics that you used.

Daphne: During the time I had no idea even how to network, how to do informational interviews.

I was only using job search boards. I was not even going straight to the company's websites. There are so many missteps that I know that I took now, reflecting back on what I was doing.

And I went into it really not expecting it to actually go well out for an interview. I was a little hesitant to believe it. And I ended up having the interview and right afterwards I was like, oh crap. That was actually a really great interview.

Elyse: So you went into this new role, was it a culture shock for you?

I mean, how was adapting to this kind of totally new environment that you hadn't really worked in before?

Daphne: The first two or three months were very, very hard [00:10:00] but wonderful at the exact same time. I had come from an environment where I was professionally written up for writing something on a whiteboard. A math problem.

And my administrator had walked in one day and said, oh, you were writing a math problem up on a whiteboard. I prefer it if you use the projector, that's at the back of the room, it's not something that's ever documented that it was necessary. It was just something she felt like writing me up for, cause she said she couldn't see from where she was standing. My back was blocking the math problem. That environment led me to believe that everything I was doing was wrong, like so wrong that you could potentially get fired for it, so wrong that the difference between a pencil and a pen is make or break whether or not someone's ever going to treat you like a professional, just very small things and very micromanaging situation.

So I went into this new role [00:11:00] and it was an independent contractor position, meaning that I didn't have a manager breathing down my neck. They treated me like a professional. They said, this is your job. We trust you, you have a master's in curriculum and instruction. You have more than enough experience to do this.

Now you make this role what you want to and go do a great job. So the first two or three months of flexibility, freedom, autonomy. I was watching my back the whole time thinking like, okay, when are they going to fire me? I'm obviously an idiot. I was treated like an idiot for three years. Society, administrations always say that they value educators, but all you have to do is look at a couple of the comments on a Facebook article and you'll see what they really truly think of educators these days.

So I had really low career self-esteem and being treated professionally was a huge struggle for me. I kept second guessing it. [00:12:00] After a little while I realized what a change it really truly was to be able to feel like I was qualified and to feel valued and to have a company continue to reach out and say, you're doing a wonderful job, keep it up.

Without that caveat of, you should work a lot harder, you should be doing more or any kind of guilt trips that come with education in general. If you don't do this, above and beyond, then you must not really care about the kids. So there was no real gaslighting, it was just very cut and dry.

Like this is your job and you're doing a wonderful job and we can see the impact that you're having. And that was just a wonderful shift.

Elyse: I think that the points that you brought up that are super interesting was this idea of imposter syndrome and not feeling like you were qualified and then guilt. And I'm curious in your experience and we'll get to talking about your own podcast and your own work coaching other teachers, but is that [00:13:00] something that you see kind of across the profession?

Daphne: 100% imposter syndrome and guilt drive how many teachers perform in the classroom and when they start to do the transition, and I don't want to say for anyone listening, who's not an educator that imposter syndrome and guilt doesn't come in other career switches because absolutely.

I think imposter syndrome is in all of us in anything challenging that we do. I think that it's a lot more common than we believe, but I do see it a lot with teachers in general. Just speaking specifically about teacher guilt, teachers go into this with a mindset that they are going to change lives and every single small detail feels very heavy. There is something big at stake and something big, that they're really dedicated to, and really passionate about. And that's children and children's wellbeing and [00:14:00] education in general. So the difference between two hours of grading papers or having the students grade themselves potentially, and you spending those two hours with your loved ones, really weighs heavy on teachers. They start to think, if I'm not doing things like this, I'm doing a disservice. If I don't decorate my classroom every month for my students to get excited to come in, I'm doing a disservice. If I take a sick day and my students have a substitute teacher, but I know these five students are below reading level and I really wanted to spend this day focusing on them.

There's just so much at stake that it's really hard for teachers to stop thinking of other people. Once it comes to that moment in everybody's life, when your priorities and your

needs actually directly impact someone else's needs and you have to choose yourself. And that's especially when it comes to starting to leave teaching. [00:15:00]

Many people stay for years and they think of how the other educators at their school are going to handle it if they leave and how it's going to impact students, if they have a less qualified teacher in that position. And it's very hard for teachers to remove the guilt of really prioritizing themselves.

Elyse: Yeah. I can definitely see that. I mean, it's times 100 from the general feeling of if I'm going to leave a job, how do I feel about my coworkers? Am I leaving people in the lurch? This is like a whole different level. And I've talked to former nurses, who've gone into corporate jobs or things like that.

But I think, especially if you're coming out of something like teaching or something like the medical profession where it really feels like it's a one-to-one relationship, and you're responsible for the lives of other people in a sense, I think that guilt is super real.

So how did you overcome that in your own change?

Daphne: It took a [00:16:00] while. I started making more money. I started getting paid to travel. They were paying for her nicer hotel rooms and I felt freaking guilty that I was happy. And I had former colleagues that I knew were not happy. I almost felt ashamed or like, I didn't want to be braggy. And I also struggled with knowing that I wasn't directly impacting students. For me, working at, and I've not just been an educational consultant, I've also done instructional design for another one of the fastest growing tech companies. Staying in the industry of education and working for two companies that I know I value their mission. I hear the behind the scenes discussions of how they're actually making decisions on what they're actually doing with teachers.

It's not, you know salesy, as some people may feel other [00:17:00] curriculum companies are, just knowing that what I'm doing, I get to still impact education, but from a different capacity. It has helped me with some of that guilt. I'm still very passionate about what I'm doing. I'm still able to actually help teachers in a variety of capacities, not just with my full-time job, but also with, you know, coaching them and helping them make their own transition. And then when I felt like I really needed to scratch that itch of impacting students directly, I started to volunteer. I know you and I are both Los Angeles based.

There's a nonprofit organization that does creative writing workshops for kids that I volunteered at from time to time, just to still be able to feel like I was making an impact in that way. And one thing that I always talk to teachers about with leaving teaching is like, you went into this with a good heart.

And you have to realize, whatever your title is, you still are a good person with a good [00:18:00] heart. It doesn't necessarily need to be a teaching profession for you to still make an impact on people's lives. And you'll always have that with you.

Elyse: I think that is so interesting because it really goes back to this idea of, and this is going to get a little meta for a second and I'm sorry, but this idea of, a lot of teachers are women.

Right. And it kind of goes into this whole concept motherhood. My sister has my nephew who's two years old, but when she became a mom for the first time I was looking at all of these articles and things about how you're doing motherhood wrong, no matter what you do. Like, oh my gosh, why would you ever leave your kid to go hang out with your friends? Why would you ever leave your kid to go, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And it almost feels like as women, we have to be selfless. And this idea that we actually want something for ourselves, we want to make a decent wage, and we want to like actually have healthy boundaries and do something that's fulfilling and not going to burn us out [00:19:00] completely, while still helping people.

We feel so guilty about that because we're not being self-sacrificing.

Daphne: Yeah. I actually had a therapist come on my podcast and talk specifically about why so many teachers struggle with the decision, even though 365 days out of the year, they're unhappy.

The ones that have identified, you know, I need a career switch, but I just can't do it. That's such a common situation. And she explained I'm gonna maybe botch it. But I think it's called the human giver. That's specifically roles where people are expected to constantly be giving and supporting other people.

They're usually very polite, they're usually very well-mannered. So there's like givers in society. And then there's also like human beings and the human beings are able to like create and consume and just be their own selves. But the human givers, those are the ones that if they ever actually start to voice their concerns or [00:20:00] start to do things that aren't in that giving capacity, the human beings are gonna push back.

And that's, I think exactly what you're seeing right now with the dynamic and the last year and a half about what's been happening with teachers who are saying, we love your students, but we're scared for our own, you know, physical safety concerns on everyone says like, how dare you.

Elyse: I'm really curious. It kind of brought up for me. So you mentioned that your mom was a teacher. So when you started making this change and obviously you were dealing with your own kind of guilt and everything, but what did your family think of this idea of you leaving teaching?

Daphne: So my mom was a teacher and when I started to go into teaching as a profession, she said, don't do it. It's absolutely terrible. And maybe the one time in my adult life that I should have listened to my mom. But in retrospect, teaching was something that shaped who I am, and I don't have any regrets about that. [00:21:00]

But my mom and my dad, when I started to say that I was leaving and I was trying to find other careers, they were supportive, but they were nervous. I had within the last year, moved to a new city and teaching on paper is a very stable career. And so anything that I was going to do after that felt like it was such a risk and would I be able to pay my own bills?

But in retrospect, I had a master's in curriculum and instruction, but my teaching job was not paying me well enough to feel comfortable enough even living in Los Angeles. So they were supportive. I think kind of what you'll hear over and over again, is, you can't do that. You're such a good teacher. And that's one of the things that kind of society always says, oh, you don't want to leave. You're such a good teacher. And I even had some former colleagues that said the same thing, try another district, try a third district.

And that was, what I just kind of had to overcome [00:22:00] myself is just because you are good at something doesn't mean it's necessarily where you need to stay forever.

Elyse: So you got this new job you're loving life. Life is good. What was the point at which you decided that you wanted to start helping other teachers make career changes?

Daphne: So I got that first educational consulting position and right off the bat, I had 15 colleagues that were scattered throughout the United States and they were all former teachers and people in sales positions at those company, people who were the directors of like learning and development at this company, people who are project managers, they were all former teachers out of nowhere.

I went from only really knowing that teaching could be like, you could be a teacher, you could be a curriculum specialist, or you could be an administrator to knowing all of these other options that were available to me in that moment. I was speaking at national conferences [00:23:00] and I always would start out by saying, I'm a former fifth grade teacher. This is what you're going to learn today. And people would come up and whisper and say, So, how did you get this job? And it's teachers who were there at these conferences, but they're just dying to find out, like, how do you make the transition from A to B?

And I had one of my past principals, not from the last school, but the one previously asked me if I could help him find a job. And I had teachers follow me out to my car at parking lots and say, how did you get the job that you have today? And then I just reflected on what it was like in my own career transition, because I was in this bubble..

And everyone said, no, you just need to go to a different school. And that's the first thing that I say is try a different school, try a different grade level, try a different district. That's the first step that I would absolutely take because sometimes it is just a shift in environment, but from there nobody had any [00:24:00] other advice for them.

And from Google searches, nobody had any advice. They said, okay, become a tutor. I mean, you can become a freelancer and tutor and make a great income. But I wanted something that had stability and I needed the money like yesterday at that point.

So I started to create the resources that I wished existed when I was looking. And because this was a couple of years ago, it came with a lot of pushback. It came with a lot of teachers saying anybody leaving is a backstabber. Oh, you guys were never good teachers. If you're leaving, it came with a little online bullying. And I just kept creating, and I actually teamed up with someone that has career coaching, recruiting, HR experience, and I paid her that heavy fees to create well-rounded resources.

We created all these resources of helping teachers identify specific class based on their interests, [00:25:00] burnout level and years of experience in the classroom.

And then how to rewrite their resumes so that they're not being deceptive, but able to actually show how their skills translate into these new industries. And we just really have taken it from there. And I wish that it wasn't as needed as it is right now. It will always be needed just because there weren't a lot of resources for this, but it has been very helpful to so many teachers who ended up needing to leave in the last year and a half.

Elyse: I can imagine that there are so many teachers are looking at alternative careers, especially now, but I think what we're finding is that even outside of teaching, so many people are looking for other careers right now. Just to have a better alignment with their lives and what they're looking for.

Teachers have a number of obstacles that they have to overcome and a lot of mindset issues and psychological barriers that they have to overcome in order to successfully transition careers. What do you think is the best advice that you [00:26:00] have for teachers looking to make the change?

Daphne: Oh, that is a difficult one. So I already said the first three steps that I would take if you are on the fence, if you are not sure if you have given teaching your best shot, consider a change in environment, especially if you think it's just the environment that you're in is impacting you.

But if you are thinking of making a switch, and you have no idea where to go, I have what's called three career buckets and that's where I kind of put teachers in these different categories. So if you love working with students, if you love the interactions with kids and that's something that you can not give up, there's a couple of different careers that I would start exploring that could be, and right now during COVID, this is not a great career choice, but like museum education programs, usually anywhere that you ever took kids [00:27:00] on field trips, those types of people need classroom management skills to train the people who actually do the field trips.

They need curriculum developers for them. There's also roles like childcare facilities, not specifically as the person doing it, but as a manager or in a leadership position, someone with more experience and a higher pay scale. Then in the middle, that's just working at an education company, which is where I found myself.

Because there's a variety of positions that you can do from customer success to sales, to project management, to professional development. There's something called an implementation specialist at many ad tech companies and technology companies in general, that just basically do this, like walk through of how to use a product very much like teaching.

Education companies in general are great places for you to explore other options, because you're already familiar with the subject matter. You're going in as a subject matter expert. And then the last one is leaving education altogether. And that is for if [00:28:00] you are totally burnt out, if you just want to work with adults, if you really did not find yourself wanting to have any experience in the other two buckets. That's corporate training

positions, human resources positions, learning and development roles. Even office manager is something that teachers do a really great job of because they are kind of that team leader puzzle piece, they're doing the organizing.

They know all of the like data at HR policies. They keep things confidential and then they also check in with people, make sure everybody has what they need in order to get their job done. So some places to start exploring that. Knowing what your options are far ahead of time is the best advice that I would give.

Because in so many other industries, you get to see examples of what other people are doing and transitioning where teaching has been this bubble and you may not know. So starting to explore what other former teachers have done, where have they gone? What made that a good fit for them far in [00:29:00] advance?

So you can start kind of brainstorming how you can work towards that goal.

Elyse: I think that's great advice. And even reaching out to have conversations with some of those people, doing some informational interviews, but I think overall what you said, to me, sounded really like, as a teacher, you have so many options.

You've been in this role where you wear so many hats and you're responsible for so many people that when you start to look at other roles, it almost seems like everything's very specific. There are certain roles where you're like, HR specialists, okay, what does that mean?

Implementation specialists, okay, what does that mean? It's one of those things where you have to have confidence that your skills are transferable. The skills that you're learning as a teacher are super transferable.

And when you're looking at job postings, you can start to find that language in those job postings where you're like, oh, I've done that. Or maybe I haven't done that with that specific product, or for that specific industry, but I've done that at a high level.

Daphne: Yeah. And I think it's always a misconception that one [00:30:00] role is going to be identical to all the other roles. So maybe they saw a customer success position that looked really intimidating. And so they never looked at another customer success position in their life.

That is a mistake that I see so many people do. Making sure that you seen a lot of data before you jump to your conclusion, if one of your teacher friends said, I enrolled, I applied for an instructional design job once and I didn't get it, that doesn't mean all teachers can't get them. Make sure that you really understand the numbers.

I think one thing that teachers struggle with is in teaching, even when we say a teaching job as quote unquote competitive. We haven't ever really experienced what competitive is. And so once we start to transition into these new careers and we get rejection after rejection, after rejection, we start to take it very personal.

It's hard for us to [00:31:00] understand that there is a yes around the corner because we just have such low career self-esteem. So knowing ahead of time, that just because you're getting rejection letters, it means you need to reflect, you do need to still continue to grow, change your skill sets, maybe change your resume, how it's written.

But it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. There has been so many people who have successfully done this transition. You are capable of doing it too. It just might take a lot more leg work than you anticipated.

Elyse: That's right. And it's about really knowing your pitch and refining your story.

And these are all things that you can learn. It's not a referendum on who you are or whether you're a good person or not.

So as we kind of finish up here you mentioned that you have a quiz with these three buckets. What other resources do you have for teachers looking to make a big career change?

Daphne: Yeah, so I have a ton of free [00:32:00] resources, I'm actually just going to have it all on one easy to use page, which is teachercareercoach.com/careerswitch for your audience. But I have that career quiz for teachers to take, to see what bucket they fall in. When they sign up to take that career quiz, I actually send out resources to help them get started on my newsletter.

I have a ton of different blogs that I've created over the last three years about some of the most frequently asked questions that teachers have, which is, what happens if I have to break my contract mid-year? Because that is a very real possibility. For many teachers who are looking for a career transition, we have a teeny tiny application window and sometimes we do have to leave in the middle of the school year, whether or not you choose to do that, that is your own personal decision. But I also have a podcast which is on that same page and it's called the Teacher Career Coach podcast. I give a [00:33:00] ton of career advice. I share my story. I interviewed former teachers in a variety of positions.

It's a great place to hear other voices that sound like you and might surprise you and make you envision yourself in a role that you've never dreamed of. There's been one of the most popular episodes is a former third grade teacher who is now a software engineer. A ton easier than teaching third grade.

And so many teachers have started going into tech heavy roles after listening to that podcast, which is amazing. And also just a full course with resume writing. It has all the interview questions, it'll help you identify a path. The most comprehensive support that I'm able to just put all my resources in one spot it's called the Teacher Career Coach Course.

And that is also found on that same webpage. So you can find all these resources once again, at teachercareercoach.com/careerswitch, just to kind of help [00:34:00] you figure out whether or not this is something that you're thinking of doing.

Elyse: Awesome. Well, thank you for sharing that and thank you for setting up this page for everybody.

So my very last question for you, which I ask everybody on the show, is what is your definition of success?

Daphne: Oh gosh, that's so great. I love that question so much and it's very hard for me. Success is something that I am able to do, 365 days a year, and still feel like myself when five o'clock comes around, I'm still able to be with my friends and family and be present in the moment. And that doesn't come with a actual number behind it. But if you're in a role that's not aligned with who you are and your values, and it's not bringing you joy when five o'clock comes, you feel it.

And so my level of success is just finding something that [00:35:00] feels good year round, and there's always going to be hard days in any position. Just being able to live an overall happy and healthy life.

Elyse: That's awesome. Well, Daphne, thank you so much for being on the show and thank you for everything you're doing to help teachers, especially right now.

I think that it's so important. So thanks for being on the show.

Daphne: Thank you so much for having me. It's been great.