Jennifer R.: Hey everybody. Welcome to LifeSkills Radio. I'm your host, Jennifer Russell, and today we have with us education specialist Katy Adams. She is a She is a specialist in PPCD and we also have Elizabeth [Danner] who is a transition specialist. Today we're going to be talking about those first few weeks of teaching, or the first year of teaching. We know that, that's a challenge for everybody that goes into this field. So Katie, let's start and just talk about you. Tell me a little bit about why you got into education and what you're doing now.

Katie Adams: Thanks for having me, Jennifer. Yeah, I've been an SLP, a Speech Language Pathologist for about 13 years now. How I got into the field. I actually am a person who stutters and when I went to college, my professor was a individual who stuttered and I went down to him after the lecture and said, "How are you doing this? This is unreal." And he basically said, "You too can be an SLP. And I really think that this might be something that you can use to help other people as well." So that's how I got into the field. I was inspired by someone else. So what I do now is, I'm one of the the preschool specialists here, so help educate teachers of children with disabilities, aged three to five and I love it. So it's really fun.

Jennifer R.: Awesome. What about you? Elizabeth tell us a little bit about your story.

Elizabeth: Well, my story is far less noble. I came to special education to get out of gym class in eighth grade. My middle school had a special school next door that was for students with significant cognitive disabilities. And this was back in the 80's. And some of you may remember the shorts with the piping and the polyester and-

Katie Adams: Oh yeah.

Elizabeth: ... I was not a fan and I was not a fan of gym class and they said that you could get out of gym class to volunteer at the school next door one day a week. And I said, "Sign me up. I don't care what it is, I'll do it." And got there. And I worked with the four and five year olds. I was in the classroom with some little kiddos and they were so cute, and it was just such a different way to think about the world. It was a blast and there was a great teacher in the room and just really great time. Then I went on and then eventually started my career in the classroom. And so now I am the transition specialist at the service center.

Jennifer R.: That's awesome. You both have really interesting stories and a lot of years I think between the three of us, we have a lot of years in education. I know I've been in the classroom and out of the classroom for about 14 years. What about you, Katie?

Katie Adams: I think it's 13 this year.

Jennifer R.: And Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Classroom? About 20.

Jennifer R.: Wow.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And then before that, another decade of social work and supported living and working with adults.

Jennifer R.: That's amazing. Okay. So-

Katie Adams: So we all started work when we were 10, right?

Jennifer R.: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah, exactly. Yes.

Jennifer R.: Exactly. Let's just go back to those first weeks of being in the classroom. I mean, I know my own experience was crazy. I don't even know if I remember the first week is like, I think I've blocked them out. I do remember calling my Vice Principal and crying like, "Sane, I don't think this is the right job for me." And it was a three day weekend apparently. And she's like, "Why don't you just take the three day weekend and then you're gonna come on back and we'll try again." I was like, "Okay." And somebody convinced me like, "Just give it three months." That's a season. So yeah, it was not easy by any means. So just tell me a little bit about those first few weeks and just what some of the ...

Elizabeth: Yeah, I remember being overwhelmed with both plans going caput within seconds of so either-

Jennifer R.: Second?

Elizabeth: ... yeah. Within seconds, like as soon as we would make a plan, it would fall apart. I was in my first years I had worked as a paraprofessional previous to becoming the teacher. But then when I became the certified teacher of record, that's when it became ... I remember at the end of the day, if anyone said my name, I would cringe because it was a full day of Ms. Danner, Ms. Danner, Ms. Danner. So many decisions in a day. And I think that's what hurt my brain a lot was, I didn't have the tool kit that I would later develop, that every problem that you solve, you're just adding a tool to your tool belt.

So it was a brand new problem to solve, which meant checking with a lot of people and it was so much more work in that first year, that it does pay off. Your tool belt does get bigger, I promise. And you are able to more quickly solve problems and recognize what doesn't need to be solved that, just let that one ride. But I felt like there was so much responsibility on me to make everything run smoothly, and I didn't realize that it's less about balance and more about rhythm. You're responding to what's happening, you're staying attune to your class and then you multiply that by all the multiple people in the lives-

Jennifer R.: That was what was mind blowing to me is that, I spent a lot less time teaching than I thought I was going to. It's like I spend a lot more time talking to adults-

Elizabeth: ... yes.

Jennifer R.: ... and looking at papers.

Elizabeth: And managing adults. I think that was the piece I knew that with special education, there were going to be legal requirements in the paperwork I knew that was coming. I knew teaching. And of course I knew about the unique gifts and challenges that come with intellectual disabilities. And so I was prepared for all of those things. I was not prepared to manage staff. So many staff.

Katie Adams: Oh, I thought the exact same way. I distinctly remember telling my parents when I graduated from grad school. I'm so excited. I'm working with kids all day long. When you're a speech path, there's so many different avenues you can go to. You may go into a hospital setting, you can work in a nursing home, you can work privately. And I was really excited to go work in the public schools because I thought I'm going to be working with young kids all day. And after the first week, I quickly realized I was not going to be working with kids all day. I was going to be working with adults all day.

That was the one thing that grad school really hadn't taught me about is, how am I gonna collaborate, communicate, conflict management, all those things. I really felt like I had a steep learning curve about. So I think that was one of my biggest challenges as well.

Jennifer R.: And I mean, was there anything those first couple of weeks or months just being in the classroom and the interaction with the students? Anything where you just were feeling like, "I did not see that coming." Or, "I am completely ..." Where you're flipping through the imaginary manual like, "Oh my goodness, that's not in there."

Elizabeth: Where's the section on ... Yeah. What I do remember about that whirlwind was the generosity and loving care of the paraprofessionals who had been in the classroom for a while. And just the guidance, that sometimes very subtle gentle guidance and other times they grabbed me by the shoulders. It's like, "Elizabeth, you have to call this parent." Or like that ... I just remember the supports were there as well. It didn't mean that there weren't tears driving home every night, and me checking with my other first year teacher friends, like, "Did you just suddenly spontaneously burst into tears?" "Yeah." "Okay cool."

Katie Adams: Oh yeah.

Elizabeth: All right then I guess that's, that. That's what we do this year. And for those of you listening who may be considering teaching, just skip over that part. It gets much better. But I just remember that there were ... I remember a speech therapist who at my very first ARD that I had not really been ... It was I think on my first day of teaching and somebody said, "You have an ARD in 10 minutes." And I said, "A what? And when?"

Katie Adams: "A what?" "An ARD." "A what?".

Elizabeth: "Yeah. Come again." And it was a speech therapist who said, "I'm going to lead this one." And just walked me through it, and then later said this is the way you can find out about when ARDs are happening and walked me through. So on the flip side of having to deal with so many other professionals, you also get so many professionals who can guide you and just say, "Oh, okay, I'm going to take this one and then I'm going to talk to you later to teach you."

Jennifer R.: That's true.

Katie Adams: I just can think of my first week and really thinking, "Wow, I'm not sure what I got myself into here." I had planned my first speech lesson. I was so proud of it, had every single thing laid out. I was going to do ... Had this beautiful literacy lesson. We're going to talk about some articulation skills, and then I had this receptive language had all my questions picked out, and I had a little small group of four, and I was actually working with students who are deaf and hard of hearing at the time. And I get the lesson, supposed to be a 45 minute lesson. Well 1.5 minutes later, I just finished and the kids are all over the place.

And I will never forget someone was communicating with me very loudly that this was maybe not the best lesson I'd ever planned. So as I am trying to deal with that, I turn my back to two of the members of the group. And when I turned back around, I see a huge trashcan full of trash coming on top of me and one of my students has taken the trash bin and poured it on me with the lunch remnants on it. So I didn't know what to do. I was like, "Do I act like I care? Do I act like I don't care? Do I deal with the kid who's screaming? Or do I just ..." This might be the time to get up and walk out.

This is-

Jennifer R.: Call the Vice Principal.

Katie Adams: ... call the Vice Principal.

Jennifer R.: I'm done.

Katie Adams: I tried. I'm not cut out for this, but I do want to finish that story and that student that made that big impression on me the first week, made a really big impression with me on the last week too. That is when I literally taught that student to say her name and be able to tell her mother that she loved her, and that's what I accomplished that year. And if I would have gone off that first week, I don't think I would have really been able to know how going through that, it was nothing compared to the feeling I was going to have at the end of that year, and the accomplishment I was going to feel.

I think there are ups and downs, but one thing I would say is, for people going through their first year is, you really are truly making a difference in people's lives. And you don't know what you don't know, but you will learn and you might have a kid at the end of the year who looks at their mom, says, "I love you." There's nothing better than that. So yeah, but the trash was not fun. Definitely not fun.

Elizabeth: Well, I think Katie really hit it with sometimes those biggest challenges and you never know the end of the story until you get to that chapter. So you have to just live it. There's no way around it but through it. And one example, and you ask like any specific examples, I had a student who had a seizure while we were in the community. So we had to pull the school bus over. It's a rainy day. And this was a student who had previously had been hospitalized after a seizure and had really had a lot of really life threatening conditions surrounding the seizures.

So there we were in the community and so we pulled over and we get the students off the bus so that we could take care of the student who was having a seizure. Then out of nowhere comes news van. And so we have this news van and we'd had to call the ambulance. By the time we connected with the parent of the student, the parent was understandably overwhelmed and terrified. It was just this worst case scenario scene. If I'm having to manage the students who are not having a seizure, trying to bring about the end to a seizure. And then also trying to navigate a news crew.

Jennifer R.: Right.

Elizabeth: And I'm just thinking, give me 10 trash cans to the head. This is horrible. I mean for me, it was terrible, but I also just had such a wave of empathy for that parent who her approach was rage, understandably. I mean, she was just enraged that this would be happening and she had a lot of concerns about her child. So that was a bad day. And yet the student ended up fine. And so I listened to the parent and we debriefed later. Then at the end of that year, she wrote me the loveliest letter and said, "I can't believe this was your first year of teaching, because you handled that like somebody with more experience,"

And I think it was just because I had that empathy that I could just see, even in that moment when I was overwhelmed, I could see that her overwhelm was that times 10 and I'm the one paid to be overwhelmed, you know? And so I think that ended up being ... I would have never predicted that, but that ended up being ... My proudest moment was just being able to open to that empathy for what the parent was going through in the midst of what I was going through, and staying focused on the goal of, "Help the student and help all of the other students deal with all of this."

Get us through this, was the focus, what's the most important thing right now?

Jennifer R.: Right, with our parents it's not personal typically. Is that you realize that all of these reactions that we perceive as negative are pretty much all rooted in fear?

Elizabeth: Absolutely.

Jennifer R.: Fear for not being able to be there to take care of their children and who the kids that we work with, have significant disabilities and that can be a very scary thing, to send them off to school each day. So-

Elizabeth: Absolutely.

Jennifer R.: ... yeah, it's a big responsibility. So yeah, I mean I had an ambulance, had to come to take one of my kids away that first year who fell down a flight of stairs and broke his leg. And you're with a class full of students and then an ambulance comes.

Elizabeth: I did remember chasing a city bus because a student had wandered off this campus grounds, and I took corners on two wheels, trying to track down a city bus. Thank goodness for cell phones now.

Jennifer R.: I think yeah. I did a lot of running that first year. I did. I definitely chased somebody through the streets of Brooklyn who did not get a sticker and thought that leaving school was going to be the way to solve that [crosstalk] ticket stickers. Yeah. The ways ... The. Yeah.

Elizabeth: I get it.

Katie Adams: Yeah. I used to laugh. I taught a preschool class and this class was meant for children who had unintelligible speech and we were working on their speech and their articulation skills. And so as a speech path, I'm pretty good, some of my kids would come up to me and we sing a song and they'd be like, " a, a, o, I, e." And their parent would be like, "What? [inaudible] days of the week. That's days of the week." And they'd be like, "Oh thanks." But I had this one student, I just ... He sweet thing. He would come up to me and just be talking. I'd be like, "Oh, I cannot pick this up." So what his mom and I used to do is just like safety pin notes to his little jacket, because he was three years old.

So she begged ... The student's name she [inaudible] he really had a great time yesterday, and she tell me what he did and then I could ask him about it. I looked forward to that note every single day, so I could talk to him. I wanted to know about it, about his day. I just thought that was really kind of her to include me in that process. And when I wasn't sure what he was saying, she wasn't like, "Well figure it out and that's what you're supposed to do." I was like, "I'm doing the best I can." But that student ended up doing really well, but I just remember thinking, man, that is a scary thing.

Elizabeth: That takes courage. Yeah.

Jennifer R.: So just thinking about the fact that this is a marathon. It's not a sprint, when you're a new teacher, that there's such a huge learning curve and it's very humbling I think. Because you're in the moment witnessing how much you don't know. When you just have to live in that, day after day. Like, "Oh, here's another thing I don't know." All right. And then there's another thing I don't know. And you just keep moving through your day with a series of, "Yeah, I don't know that either."

Elizabeth: You think of them all as Easter eggs. That's the strategy.

Jennifer R.: No matter how you got to the classroom, having people that you can lean on and go to, whether it's a program specific mentor that you've been assigned or a team leader, or a [crosstalk] yeah, find your friends, find your people and don't be afraid to reach out for help. And don't be afraid to admit what you don't know. I think that can be that ... Sometimes it can feel scary to do that, but that actually it's necessary.

Elizabeth: And I think if I could go back to first year self, I would just say, Take a deep breath truly." In those moments if I had stopped to take a deep breath when I was just beyond the pale, I think even that and trusting that each moment really was building towards something more and helping me and yeah ... I guess building me as a master teacher and also contributing to the whole of the classroom community. And so, yeah if I had had a little more, I think it just felt so much.

Jennifer R.: It's a lot. You put a lot ... We put a lot of pressure on ourselves I think as first year teachers, because it does feel high stakes, because you're working with children. So you're painfully aware that, "Oh, there are things I don't know. And there are people that need teaching." But yeah, I think if I could go back to my first year self, I would want to tell that person, " You know what, take it easy. Take it easy on yourself." Because showing up-

Elizabeth: I remember the first yeah.

Jennifer R.: ... yeah.

Katie Adams: Yeah.

Jennifer R.: I think stepping back and big picturing it and just thinking, "Did you show up with the best intentions? Did you show up and were you of service every single day?" That you were physically and mentally capable of doing that? And that's a pretty big accomplishment.

Elizabeth: I think that was the other thing is I felt this pressure to be in charge of everything and therefore never admit any weakness or any crack in the foundation of our structure of the classroom. I felt so much of like, "Oh, it's fine, it's fine. I can do it, I can handle it."

Jennifer R.: Right.

Elizabeth: And I had some wonderful administrators who said, "I'm going to give you a little more support."

Jennifer R.: That's great.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Jennifer R.: And enjoy the kids. I mean, I think I had to be reminded constantly because oh yeah, they're kids. And school can be really fun and kids are fun, but when you're stressed out and you're anxious, it's easy to forget that, "Hey, this is also supposed to be fun."

Katie Adams: And yeah, I think the biggest thing I learned my first year is, I wasn't going to get anywhere with a student unless I had a connection with them. And I think I had all these great lessons planned. But they were all about me. Things that I liked. I was like, "Why?" You know like that? "Oh I do." So you're going to learn a lot from this.

Jennifer R.: About dogs.

Katie Adams: About dogs. I love dogs. It's all about me. But then once I really figured out, "Okay, if I want to make the most progress with them, I need to get to know you." But sometimes with our students that can be hard.

Jennifer R.: Yes.

Katie Adams: It can be really hard. And the parents were a great gateway to that, but I really saw the value and I'm going to take time to get to know you, to play with you, to just see you, right? And see what you're interested in and really find out how I can form a connection with you, so that way you can learn. And I wish I was more about, "We're going to do this and this, this is what I'm gonna teach, this is what I want you to learn. This is what we're gonna do. This is what ..." And if I were to go back to my first year self, I'd say, "That's all great, but the first thing you need to do is really get to know your kids.

Elizabeth: What Katie said, made me think of the summer, join and follow to lead, that we're not just molding and shaping the youth of today into tomorrow's leaders. That as educators, we really have to stop and listen to them. And that, that's part of where we can find our joy. And it's also where we can find the hook that will help them to not throw trash cans. [crosstalk] them once to be a part of [crosstalk].

Katie Adams: I turn that around.

Elizabeth: You did, you did it.

Jennifer R.: Because you joined and followed and lead.

Katie Adams: Right.

Jennifer R.: Katie and Elizabeth, thank you both so much for being here. You guys are awesome and we're very lucky to have you, so ...

Katie Adams: Thanks a lot. This is great.

Elizabeth: Thanks Jen.