

TED & CEC Collaboration Podcast Special Series: Interview with Nancy Young

Unknown Welcome to a special series of the TED and CEC Collaboration Podcast. In this series, we hear the stories of families, educators, and researchers who may be or have been impacted by proposed changes to the Department of Education, Educational research funding, IDEA funding, and Medicaid. Dr. Nancy Young was most recently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Kansas. She holds a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with a special education focus. Alongside graduate certificates in transition and educational statistics, And research methods from the University of Arkansas, where she was also a doctoral academy fellow and OSEP scholar. Dr. Yung also earned degrees in school leadership, special education administration, and early childhood education. With extensive experience teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, her research aims to improve educational and employment outcomes for youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities By developing practical tools and strategies that enhance teacher capacity to support learning and behavior in inclusive classrooms. Including classroom management, developing interagency collaboration, and building self-determination skills for students and families. Welcome, Nancy. Thank you. Thanks for having me here. Yeah, I'm really excited to chat with you today. Um, I think it'll be a great conversation to really highlight the impact of some of the changes in research funding today. So let's just start off by having you Talk a little bit more about who you are and why this topic is important to you. Sure. As you mentioned, I have a PhD. It's in curriculum instruction with a focus on special education transition. So all things special ed related are important to me. My family, I have family members who have different disabilities and it's kind of what brought me into the field of education and The topic that we're talking about today with the cuts that have been being made to educational funding of course impact special education and everyone who receives those services To a larger degree than anyone else, right? Um, and the research behind it. So, well, when I got a PhD, it was with the intention of making the biggest impact possible on, you know, the improving lives of people with disabilities. And so, um, when education funding is cut and it impacts not only, um, the, um, What's going on in the actual schools themselves, but also the research that drives those practices. And so that's kind of the piece that where I'm coming into it from right now is I'm more on the research side of things at the moment. Well, I think, you know, this series has kind of highlighted some of the personal impacts, you know, with parents and families, and so Um, the previous episodes that we have released have really kind of focused on that impact of special education services and IDEA and so today we really want to focus on that research aspect right so. Tell us a little bit about the project you've been working on or that you were working on and um, maybe the funding streams for that project. Sure, so I was in my role as postdoctoral researcher at the University of Kansas. They had partnered with AIR, or the American Institutes for Research, And, um, they had a grant, uh, or a contract from IES. So they had this money, um, that was funded through IES to fund this project that I was working on. And the name of the project is called Charting My Path for Future Success. And it was one of the projects that the funding was ended with the cancellation of the IES contract. So for those who are listening and don't know what IES is, could you talk a little bit about, like, what does that mean? What does it stand for? Yeah, it's the Institute for Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. So when we talk about like this, um, chart my path for future success, what is the kind of the goal of that project? What would the impact be for? Um, let's say, you know, students or, um, teacher prep, any of that piece. Like, tell us a little bit about kind of how that impact kind of really, um, targets people with disabilities. Okay, so charting my path was a project that was nationwide. There were, um, a lot of Students involved in this study, there were about 1100 that were actively participating in receiving one of the two interventions that we were delivering to them. But what its goal was is to prepare students for adulthood. So it was widely known as the Transitions Project because we were helping students learn to set goals for themselves, learn to take actions towards those goals, you know, determining what they wanted to do, whether it was going into post-secondary education or Becoming employed and in what field and learning what actions and steps they needed to take to get there. Reflecting on the progress that they were making towards those goals and then making adjustments to it so that they could get closer to meeting their goals. And so the two programs we were delivering were the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction, or SDLMI, And so it's known as STLMI Transition. And then the other program was STLMI Transition with mentoring. So we were adding in this one-on-one coaching component to Um, to really help the students get a little bit more supports to see if it was something that little added mentoring piece is something that helped them become even more successful into their adulthood. So This is a long-term study,

a longitudinal study going into their adulthood following these same students from their high school years where we're giving them this intervention into their adulthood to see, um, kind of check what the impact was on their outcomes in adulthood. That sounds like an incredible opportunity for students to really be thinking about how, how do my, my skills right now need to improve for my schools for the future, right? So how am I going to be successful in like beyond right now? So yeah. One of the questions I had that I was thinking of while you were chatting was, you know, oftentimes we think about research and being For kind of a very small population, like we're looking at maybe students with more significant disabilities or students with More severe medical, complex medical conditions. But did this project serve all students with IEPs or was there a specific population you were targeting for this project? Yeah, I started all students with IEPs. So, um, that was one of the requirements for eligibility for the study was that they had to, um, have an IEP. But there was no specification of which type of disability. It served students who had from very, very severe disabilities, um, up to, you know, um. Much more mild disabilities. So students who, it included students who used AAC devices or eye gaze software for communication. It included students who received, you know, spent most of their day in the general education inclusive classroom setting. So, um, just serve any type of disability. And that was part of the aim of it was to determine what works for whom. So which students is this intervention effective for and how much support do they need for it to be effective? So when you heard about the funding being pulled because, you know, as a postdoctoral researcher, you know, that's really your livelihood, right? Okay, what was going through your mind at that moment? Like, tell us a little bit about that process of did you know it was coming? Was it really abrupt? How did you handle that? Yeah, so um, I went to bed on a Monday night thinking everything was fine, making travel arrangements to conduct a site visit at the two school districts that I supported. And then the next morning I woke up to an email saying that the IES contract had been canceled and I then was called into a meeting with my supervisor to find out that They have done everything that they can to try to find other funding streams or ways to keep me on board. But as a first year, as a postdoctoral researcher, that's like the first step out of your PhD program. To kind of get your foot into the door of the research world where you still are learning from people who are more experienced in the field and getting that additional support by getting to experience Diving into some deep research like this project was. Um, so it's like a stepping stone towards becoming a full professor at a university, right? And so, um, in that role, the job was contingent on the funding. And it should have been pretty much guaranteed the funding had already been, you know, It just was a real surprise when it was suddenly ended. Out of the blue like that. Um, so yeah, I was in, I was just in disbelief. Um, and then it wasn't just only about my job. It was just that these years of research that had already gone into this project were being cut short. Um, just, we were leaving partnerships with these schools just hanging. You know, many teachers were involved in this, right, that we were training. And, um, Students are losing out on support that they desperately need. And we were just really getting off the ground with us, with the students. Because years went into it ahead of time, right? There was pilot study involved. Uh, to kind of test things and see how it works before you actually start, you know, working with the participants. And then we had engaged all through the fall with training these teachers as instructors for this program. And then they had just this spring started working with students and so students were getting excited and families were getting excited and just Knowing that all that work that we were doing that could have had such a real impact on their lives and Now may not even be able to reach the people who need it the most was just, that was devastating as well. So beyond the personal impact, there was also that layer going on in my mind at the same time, just complete shock. Yeah, well, I think that's a really great point because I, you know, sometimes when folks hear about funding getting cut, the first thing we think of is like the person, you know, directly impacted, you know, maybe like you who could be losing a job. Um, but I don't think that maybe we have thought through the deeper impacts. Um, and I, I heard you talk about the teacher support that you were providing. So yeah. You know, not only was it impacting you, but impacting teachers in the field right now in K-12 education that impact students. Are feeling, you know, maybe not the mentoring piece right like that just to me sounds like such an incredible opportunity for students to have. That mentoring because we know, um, sometimes students don't have that connection or they don't have, um, the supports that they need with the resources the school district has available. So to be able to have these types of partnerships, I think, are important. Incredible ways, um, to really elevate that work and I, I hadn't even considered that as a component so I really appreciate you highlighting that as well. So for people who just don't really understand, um, how government funds kind of work with these types of research projects, especially like, um, IES grants and, you know, you You and I work in, in multiple, um, arenas, I guess, in education world where we're talking with folks all over and, um, you know, learning about OSAP funding and grants through other organizations. Can you talk just a little bit about your knowledge of Just how does this grant funding overall support projects

like this just across the country and what types of things are out there that could be impacted right now? Sure, um, when people think about research funding, they might be picturing like a lab filled with scientists, but like in the education research world, that funding goes toward real-world applications. And IES supports studies that like test what actually works in classrooms. It funds things like just that better the development of teaching methods. And it provides data to inform policy decisions that get made in the schools. So without this funding, just a huge amount of education research, especially research focused on students with disabilities who tend to have the poorest outcomes, um, it just doesn't happen without that funding. And IES was a large funder of education research. So we've lost a big piece with that. Yeah, I, you know, The more I'm reading in the news, the more I'm seeing, you know, different programs that are going to be impacted. And I think, you know, you've already mentioned a little bit about those ripple effects for teachers and students, but What do you think, you know, what else might we expect to come if this type of funding is halted? Like, we don't have research grants. Like, what else could happen? Like, what do you think long term we're looking at? Well, I think that it means we're gonna have fewer evidence-based interventions for schools. And evidence-based, for a practice to be considered evidence-based, there has to be a lot of research done on it. In different contexts, with different, you know, types of people in different settings, uh, students with different types of disabilities, for example, um, you know, in multiple different ways, this inner research has to be done for it to become considered evidence-based. So it takes a lot of research to Develop an evidence-based practice. And an evidence-based practice then is something that schools can rely on is knowing that this is something that has been shown to be pretty effective for most people. Or for this particular population, you know, they can rely on it to know this is a practice that I should be using as a teacher. And so when we have fewer evidence-based interventions for teachers to pull from, then that affects students directly. And it also disrupts the research pipeline. So doctoral students or postdocs like myself and other early career researchers rely On those projects to build our expertise, like I was talking about earlier, dipping our toe into the water of research and learning, you know, how to do that. This is not something that is just easily done, right? It takes years of experience and practice. And, um, mentoring of us, you know, coming into the field by those more experienced researchers so that we can then contribute to the field. So it really disrupts that entire pipeline of those coming up as doc students and postdocs. And I just think if funding keeps getting cut, we risk losing an entire generation of researchers potentially. And that could set education science back years or decades even. Why, Jake, about that coming from a small, you know, I'm at a small college working in, you know, teacher prep. And so thinking about a lot of our undergraduate students, too. You know, if we don't have the evidence-based practices to teach them, right? So in our teacher prep program, we focus on Highland Bridge practices, evidence-based practices, and we're thinking about What is it that students need to know as they enter into the field as first-year teachers? And just thinking about that, you know, high leverage practices were something that Took probably years and years and years of research to identify what works for students with disabilities that also can support students in jet-end spaces, you know. And so I think that piece too for me is, is just like where are we going to get some of that data and that research and those practices that we need to support future educators so that Not only is it impacting teachers in practice, researchers, you know, students, now it's affecting like how they are prepared to go out into the field and so. You know, you talked about that impact on like this this whole generation of of researchers in the field right now. I worry a little bit about. These impacts and drawing people to the field of education in the, in the current climate, you know, it's. Already difficult, you know, people, people see how hard it is to be in education and so then I worry without adequate funding or adequate research to support these practices that We're going to see a really large shift in the amount of people who are interested in education as a career in any avenue. Oh, absolutely. In order to even go into this Ph.D. program that I just completed last year, um, I was an OSEP scholar, so Office of Special Education Programs, so I received funding to pay for me to get this Ph.D., basically. And it came with a service obligation. So I, you know, need to work in the field of education in the United States for a number of years in service of that obligation to not repay the money, right? Mm-hmm. And there are so many people who rely on funding like that to go into higher education. And so that's what I was talking about. We could lose the whole pipeline of potential scholars coming up that could really be devastating for the field. Well, I think it highlights the need for educators at all levels. You know, we have the pre-service teachers, we have in-service teachers, we have people like me working in teacher prep. We have people like you working in research, you know, we have all of these levels where that impact is almost like cyclical because if it impacts you, it's going to impact students and it's going to impact teachers and then That's going to impact me because I don't know what is evidence-based and because I don't have the research to back it up, right? So I don't know what to teach my students. Um, and I think that might be kind of like a, uh, Hopefully a long way out there that we

don't have those types of resources, but I think it's what's in our minds, right? Like, that's what we're thinking about is that sustainability of our Of our profession, of education. So I think that's an important piece to bring up. But, you know, I just, I want to ask you, you know, do you think that sometimes people who are making these decisions You know, whether at a state level or at a federal level, really understand kind of the nuances and what's at stake when budget cuts like this are made. Yeah, no, I think there's a disconnect for sure. I think that, you know, education research maybe isn't as visible as other fields. And so I just think it's easy to see it as an abstract budget line item rather than as something that directly impacts students, teachers, families. Researchers, you know. And, but when we cut funding for education research, we need to understand that we're making a decision that affects classrooms. For years to come. It affects the teacher's knowledge of what interventions have been researched, tested, and proven that they need to be using. It affects, um, when that funding disappears, it affects the ability to refine and test those interventions over time. We're not done with education research. There is so much more that we need to do and keep doing so that we can keep improving our practices. And schools that they end up relying on outdated methods or making decisions without strong data to back them up. And ultimately, students with disabilities are going to lose access to the best possible supports. And that'll just widen that achievement gap that already exists between students who have disabilities and their peers who do not. And it'll also just limit their opportunities into adulthood. Well, one of the things that I was just thinking about as you were talking and you know that this direct impact on students. When I was at the CEC convention a couple weeks ago, and I'm not going to be able to give credit where credit is due because I cannot remember who said this. Um, it may have been in a keynote and it may have been someone from, um, your institution. Gosh, I don't even know. So, um, and I can't remember his name. But he made the comment, you know, that so much of what we do today in education is We don't know the true impact of that, right? Because we're seeing them on a day-to-day basis and we don't know what their life looks like. Post high school. So he talked a lot about that like workforce in twenty years. What does our workforce look like in twenty years when when right now in education we maybe don't have the resources that we need to provide students with the skills they need? To do jobs that might not even exist yet. You know, we see this, um, huge impact that AI is having all across the world and just how quickly things are changing and Um, you know, again, another, uh, person at that, at the, it might've been at the same keynote talked about, you know, AI is not going to take your job. Probably not yet, at least. But someone who knows how to use it really well might, right? So, you know, I think this gets into a whole nother conversation where we could probably talk all day about If we don't know what works and we don't know how to teach students right now and we can't help them develop these critical skills, what does that workforce look like in twenty years? What does it look like in thirty years? So these students who are not being prepared for a really fast-paced changing world Like, we're not going to know that impact. And so when we think about our students who maybe are our most vulnerable, those with disabilities, like, what does their livelihood look like? How do we help support them post high school, you know? To help them feel fulfilled in a job or in some sort of post-secondary education opportunity like or living independently or semi-independently. So there are lots of ways and so there are just so many pieces that I can't. I think that just kind of in general, like as a general population, we don't understand about the true impacts of these types of cuts. For sure. So how about, just kind of coming back to how this impacted you, like, has it changed how you think about your career and moving forward? Oh, absolutely. It has, I think, made me more aware of how vulnerable research careers are to policy shifts. And I mean, I still believe deeply in the importance of this work, of course, but I'm also now having to start thinking more about how to advocate for sustainable funding. And also diversify my career options at the same time. So I'm having to look at other sectors and not, um, and so that's potentially that pipeline that I keep referring back to being disrupted. So just... For me, for example, I may have to step away from a career in research. It just, I'm interviewing right now, looking for work, you know, exploring all my options, but because of this I'm having to Think carefully about the funding structure of the job opportunities that are, um, that I'm finding out there and thinking about is this another job that I could be stepping into a similar situation where the funding may be cut as well. And I don't want a job security. Yeah, job security is always on my mind. You know, more now than ever. Yeah, for sure. So if you could sit down with someone who's been in charge of these types of decisions, what would you say to them to help them understand or maybe to change their minds about these decisions? Well, I would just say, look, you know, look at the impact that this is having beyond the budget sheet. So don't just look at the budget line item and say, how much could we save if we get rid of this program? Um, for one thing, I think we need to be diving deeper and looking at. How much has already been invested into the program. The one I was working on had already been going on for a number of years. So the funding that got cut just made it so that we can't get the results from that funding and see the value in it. And,

um, these cuts also don't just affect researchers, though. We need to be thinking deeper about how they affect the schools and the teachers and the students. Um, and their families even. Um, and just thinking about if we want real educational progress, we need to fund research that makes that possible. That's where we make change is by funding the research that drives the change. And so I think investing in education research, we need to think of it as an investment in the future workforce and in the future economy. Creating, you know, equity in our school systems where we're leveling the playing field for students with disabilities and helping close that achievement gap. So it's a great uh, segue into the next question because it's what advice do you have for people who you know are considering education or who might be in research Like, what would you tell them right now when it feels really uncertain? Yeah, I would say I think build a network beyond academia. Staying open to different career paths is going to be really important right now. Keep developing your research skills, you know, um, data analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, those are all really valuable skills in many fields. So really diving into those, um, I guess those skills would be really important and then broadening your view on what your career path could look like. Maybe also getting involved in advocacy to help push for, like, better funding stability in research. Advocating for that would be really critical right now. I think that's something that we're all kind of seeing that push, you know, in education. Many of us When we were in our undergrad programs, even graduate programs, there wasn't a lot of conversation around advocacy. You know, we didn't, we weren't really trained on what that meant or how to do it. Um, and I think most of it comes through the lens of being a special education teacher because I think you just naturally have to learn how to be that advocate to make sure kids are getting what they need and so I think that that kind of the the tide is shifting there a little bit because I think more and more often now. We're helping to prepare educators to understand what it means to be an advocate and how it's not always A political stance or a political push, but how to talk to politicians about what we're doing and about the impact that it has when they make a decision without consulting someone in education. Um, and so I think that that advocacy piece is so important. I think that's such great advice because it's really easy for any of us to get behind a keyboard and a screen and share our thoughts and opinions with the world. But, you know, as Kate Brennan tells us, right, like, there's power in our stories. And so sharing our stories with our legislators and emailing them and calling them and telling them How these types of things directly impact their constituents, you know, us and the students who live in their districts, I think is so powerful and so powerful. Um, I really appreciate you bringing up that piece of advocacy and I want to give you one opportunity here at the end to just what kind of last words or, you know, last thoughts do you want to share today with our listeners? I just think that we need to be more vocal about why research matters because I think it's often overlooked, especially like I talked about education research. Um, and misunderstood. So just I think that's going to mean we're going to need to step up and start engaging more with our policymakers than perhaps we have in the past. And like you said, sharing our work in a way that the public can understand and telling our stories, personalizing it like we're doing in this podcast and really just pushing for overall long-term investment in education science. And treating it as the science that it is and respecting it as such. And seeing the value that it is offering to real life people, to students and their families. And then I think that, um, institutions are also going to need to find ways to support researchers through their own, these, um, uncertain times with funding, right? Funding. Other ways that they can continue the pipeline to grow. And um, So it might be, I don't know, I don't know what that looks like. Maybe, um, finding other kinds of partnerships or maybe non-profits or private sector or other types of internal grant programs, but it's going to take a lot of, um, creativity. And partnering and trying to really work around all the struggles that we're having so that we can continue advocating in all the ways and can keep this pipeline going and keep the research being funded. It's really, we're at a crisis point with it right now. Thank you, Nancy, so much for your expertise today and sharing your story with us. I, I hope people feel compelled to reach out and, you know, contact their legislators and share your story of this real impact in education. Thanks for having me today. I really enjoyed talking to you.

Jamie Nelson Thank you for tuning in to this episode of the TED and CEC Collaboration Podcast. We hope you found our discussion enlightening and inspiring. Remember, change begins with awareness and advocacy is the catalyst for progress in education. Keep exploring, keep advocating, and keep pushing boundaries to create a brighter future for exceptional learners everywhere. Join us next time as we continue our journey of discovery and action in education. Until then, stay informed, stay engaged, and keep advocating for what matters most. We want to take a moment to express our gratitude to the incredible individuals who have contributed to the TED and CEC collaboration podcast. First and foremost, a big thank you to the TED organization and CEC for their collaboration and support in making this podcast possible. Your commitment to special education, advocacy, and policy is truly inspiring. We also extend our heartfelt

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