

## **CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription**

Episode 58: Briona McKinney

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today I'm joined by Briona McKinney. Hello and welcome, Briona.

Briona: Hi, Terry.

Terry: Hi. Let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Briona McKinney has been a special educator for over 13 years, and for the last 11, she has taught students impacted by autism spectrum disorder at the Harlan Elementary School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. She became a CPI Certified Instructor in 2016 and she provides training to her district's general and special educators, paraprofessionals, administrators, and ancillary staff. In today's interview, we're going to talk about how Briona's background in dance has led her to think of classroom and behavior management as a kind of choreography, how the influence of a CPI Instructor that taught her was "life changing," and how she uses CPI's Decision-Making Matrix with great success in her classroom.

All right, Briona. Let's begin. We'll start today by acquainting our listeners with your teaching history. How did you decide to become a teacher? And I understand you were well on your way to majoring in dance when things changed.

Briona: Yeah. So I actually began my undergraduate career as a dance major. You know, I had devoted my life to dance. I was accepted on scholarship to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. So I had this great talent, but during my junior year was really feeling a pull to do something else. So I applied to the School of Education and switched my major to special education and graduated in 2006 with a special education degree and endorsements in learning disabilities and cognitive impairments. Luckily, I was hired right out of college as a researching teacher in a district that was close to home and that's when I met my student named Scott. He was my first student to have a diagnosis of autism and he was moving from a more restrictive environment back to his home school; [he was] moved to a third-grade classroom with a resource room and care-professional support.

And Scott was unlike any other student I had supported up until then. He needed me for everything, essentially, and I helped him maneuver through relationships with his peers, I helped him with communication skills, with his life skills, with socialization, and my work

with him went far beyond just supporting him in academics. And as an educator, I found I was growing exponentially, and that's when I decided that I wanted to spend my career working with individuals impacted by autism.

So I went back, got my master's degree, and I've been working with students with autism ever since.

Terry: I see. Can you talk a little bit more about—I mean, you've got this great talent and this passion for dance. What kind of thunderbolt hits you? Do you recall the sort of epiphany, if you will, or what happened that made you decide that you wanted to be an educator?

Briona: You know, dance is—it's all about the person and what that person can bring others through their movement, through the passion, and I wanted to inspire others in a different way. I didn't want it to be me on a stage telling a story with my body. I wanted to be hands-on, working with people who needed my help.

Terry: That's great. Well, let's talk about your current school and classroom. Where is your district located?

Briona: Yeah. So for the past 11 years, I've been working in Birmingham Public School. It's a district that's located in Oakland County in Michigan, and Birmingham's unique in that it houses the only central program in Oakland County for individuals with autism from preschool age until 26 years old. And so we service residents in Birmingham that are on the autism spectrum but we also service individuals in local districts throughout Oakland County whose needs are not able to be met within their own district and who may require more restrictive programming or support.

So in the school I teach at, Harlan Elementary, there are two central program classrooms in the building. I have six students from kindergarten to second grade who are severely impacted by their autism. You know, students are working on learning how to help communicate; they're working on learning systems and procedures to increase their independence within the classroom and school environment; they're learning basic life skills and social skills, and we are constantly working on alternative behavior, which needs to be a focus, especially considering their inclusion with their same-age peers as well as the behavioral skills needed as they grow and one day become adults that can hopefully be employed.

So we're very lucky to have a district where all of our central program classrooms are within general education building so that our students have access to their same-age peers even though they may be working on a modified curriculum.

Terry: I see. So, it sounds like you have kind of an ideal mix. Because these six students need so much specialized attention and really maybe wouldn't work in a completely integrated setting, they still have a sense of that based in the school that they actually visit every day.

Briona: Correct.

Terry: I see. You know, during our pre-interview, you said that your classroom is choreographed. In relationship to your career as a dancer, I think that's really fascinating. And that also, I'm sure, relates to your behavior management methods, everything in the classroom. Could you speak to what that means?

Briona: Yeah, so, you know, I think I'm always going to be a performer. And so in my mind, my school day is an eight-hour performance. You know, arguably, dance is all about control. So every movement a dancer takes requires full control of the mind and the body. And if you've ever had the opportunity to see a professional dance company, you know, it truly looks effortless to the audience, but if you've ever been behind the scenes, you know that's not the case.

So there are parts of autism that are very predictable, and in those moments when transitions are happening smoothly and when team members are successfully executing instruction and the lights are low and there's calm music playing in the background, you know, when the stage has been set, essentially, and everyone is engaged in learning, it really truly feels like a beautifully choreographed piece of art.

You know, now there are those moments when we have little control over situations, and in my dancer mind, that looks like improvisation. So there may be a lot of different moving parts, but it's important for me to still make it look effortless and that I have control over myself even if students become escalated. So when the music stops, when the lights go out or my partner isn't where he or she is supposed to go on, the show must go on. And after the show and when the curtains fall and the audience leave, that's when we can figure out how we can make the next eight-hour performance that next day go even smoother.

Terry: So there's great thought and deliberation as there would be for a dance performance behind the way you approach your classroom and your teaching?

Briona: Yeah, yes.

Terry: I see. Well, that's very interesting and to think of it as an eight-hour performance, first of all, it sounds exhausting.

Briona: It is. [laughter]

Terry: No doubt about it but [that's a] really interesting parallel and I think a meaningful one. During our pre-interview, you talked to me also about a CPI trainer named Nancy—is it Cosas?

Briona: Kocsis.

Terry: Kocsis, Nancy Kocsis that you said was “life-changing for me as an educator,” and you also told me a story about the first day that Nancy took you to a special ed classroom. Could you talk about Nancy and about that first day and why it impacted you so strongly?

Briona: Yeah. So, in 2008, a position opened up in my current classroom in Birmingham, and I applied for the position, was granted an interview, and a couple of days after that interview, received the unfortunate news that they were moving in a different direction. So I took that as an experience and went back to work with Scott and my other students, and I was surprised when my phone rang the next day at 4:30, asking if I was still interested in the position, and then [I received] an invitation to visit the classroom before accepting.

So the next day, I walked through the doors of Harlan Elementary School and Nancy Kocsis, who’s our autism teacher-consultant in the district, met me there. And this is probably not how it went—but I truly remember it as though I had entered into this like top-secret, high-security area—because it’s like she had guided me by the arm down this long hallway to a small dark room, and she sat me down and explained that the teacher they had hired and reported the day before worked from 8:30 to 4:00, left work, drove to the administration building and quit. Then she explained, you know, the intensity of the classroom, and she wanted me to observe the students before officially accepting the position.

She walked me down to the classroom and opened the doors. They had bells on the handle, easy access to enter or exit, and I witnessed a student holding a lunch tray, and he was repeatedly hitting a staff member while she was on the ground struggling to move. She needed help, and Nancy and the other team members helped her to move to a position of safety.

And in that moment, I wasn’t fearful of what I saw; I wasn’t fearful of the population or the intensity that seemed to have driven the previous teacher away, but I wanted to make it better. And after I formally accepted the position, Nancy—this is why she’s so great—she stayed with me that day. She stayed with me that week. She stayed with me that month and she modeled for me and guided me and built me up and let me cry. She listened to my fears, she celebrated successes. She taught me what it meant to be an outstanding teacher for students who are severely impacted by autism, and it wasn’t until I went through CPI training as a participant with Nancy that I realized that CPI isn’t just for interactions we have with our students that are in our care, but Nancy had essentially “CPI’d” me through my entire first month as a teacher. You know, aside from using a physical intervention with me, not only—she not only CPI’d, [facilitated CPI training], but lived and breathed CPI and let that drive every interaction that she had with me as my mentor. And that’s when I knew CPI was special, because it’s not just something we use

with our students when the time comes. It's a mindset; it's a belief; it's a way of life and it can be used in your interactions with everyone you come in contact with.

Terry: So, Nancy mentored you in the CPI immersion method. And you were able to internalize the things like our behavioral models and something we're going to talk about in a minute, and the whole CPI approach to an Integrated Experience was something that Nancy brought you to awareness of through her care and understanding in that difficult first month.

Briona: Yeah. Definitely.

Terry: Wow! And what do you remember about CPI training in the classroom most particularly?

Briona: You know, I had—as a new teacher in the classroom, I had seen her use it and live it and breathe it, so then sitting and training, everything clicked. You know, it all made sense. What I was seeing and then what I was hearing and the reasons why we do the things we do, it all came together and it all clicked.

Terry: I see. And now, you've said that you've made very effective use of the CPI's Decision-Making Matrix. Could you talk about why that's been so useful to you?

Briona: Yeah. The Decision-Making Matrix is one of my favorite parts of teaching in the training, because I look out at the participants, who in the beginning of the unit have some confusion on their faces when I start explaining, you know, the car, the airplane, and then finally, we get to the motorcycle to show high likelihood, high severity, and every single face is lit up. And it's just the best view from the front of the room. I'll have to tweet a picture and tag CPI in it to show you because it's a great view.

And CPI has done a fabulous job of giving us a visual to show what low risk and what high risk looks like using that car, that airplane, and that motorcycle analogy. And participants really understand what we mean when we talk about risk being high in likelihood but low in severity or high in likelihood and high in severity. And what we want to remind our participants is that an airplane, no matter how hard it tries and no matter how much intervention, it's always going to be an airplane. You know, a motorcycle, no matter how hard it tries and no matter how much intervention, it's always going to be a motorcycle. As educators, we should have no expectations of them changing. Period. Because that's what they were built to do, and their risk level is always going to stay the same. However, people in our care can change. They can learn. They can move around on the Matrix and our expectation of them changing and our expectation of ourselves to help them change, you know, should be high.

So as a district, we're beginning to use the Decision-Making Matrix as a tool to track risk behavior in our prevention meetings and behavior plan meetings. So we are identifying where a student is on the Matrix and we're talking specifically about what we can do to

decrease the severity of harm as well as the likelihood. And we're starting to see students move around on the matrix with the ultimate goal being, you know, that bottom left corner where low likelihood and low severity lives. I don't know what vehicle that would be because—maybe like a golf cart.

Terry: Okay. That's good.

Briona: I don't know! [laughter]

Terry: Very nicely done.

Briona: Yeah. Now, you know, we know we might not get every student's behavior to be that golf cart every time, but when we put actual students on the Matrix and we identify patterns, we're able to put real things into place, not to just decide if there's a need for physical intervention, but see student behavior go from a higher risk to a lower risk, and it's happening and it's so exciting.

Terry: You know, I find that especially remarkable, considering that you work with some of the most challenged kids on the spectrum. I mean, you would expect almost more of a static, "Well, you are going to be a motorcycle," but you've really freed your own expectation, despite the severity of some of the behavior and the persistence of behaviors. You've dedicated yourself to changing and saying, "Well, they are not a motorcycle. We can get them to be a golf cart."

And so I'm curious about how long it takes to start to move students. I mean, I'm sure they're all different, but what are some of the things that you see that start to change their risk of incidence and severity?

Briona: You know, with a lot of students—and I'm going to use an example of a student that maybe has, you know, high likelihood, high severity, and may be in that motorcycle spot or close to that motorcycle spot. We have to start somewhere. And so what we have found as staff [is] that it seems to be easier, it seems to have a little bit more control over trying to work on the severity of harm instead of the likelihood, because the likelihood to us in terms of what our behavioral data looks like, you know, it's a behavior that's been learned over many, many, many years and many, many, many times, and for whatever reason, that behavior is working for that student. And so what can we do as staff is to decrease the severity first, which we're finding is actually decreasing the likelihood as well.

Terry: That's very interesting. I'm just picturing this in my mind and just seeing how you would say, "Well, the likelihood is very high because of repeated behavior, but we can change the severity." But then you're also seeing the likelihood decreasing along with the severity, maybe because they're not getting the same reaction that they once got from the behavior.

Briona: Right. So a perfect example of that is a student who has a high-risk behavior because of biting. So, likelihood is high; severity is high. And when staff started wearing thick armguards, the severity of harm immediately decreased because the student was no longer biting flesh but [was instead biting] the arm guard. And after a few times, the likelihood decreased because the student didn't like how that arm guard felt when he bit down. And so that magic moment is when behavior's been interrupted, and the risk decreased, and the staff finally has that opportunity to teach, you know, to teach that alternate behavior and give him something else to bite when he's upset. And so that moment where we can teach when that behavior's been interrupted, we're finding more moments like that. And it's working with even our most severely impacted students.

Terry: That's a great illustration of working with the Matrix to bring about that change. And could you tell our listeners a story about where CPI de-escalation techniques maybe saved the day?

Briona: Yeah. You know, we are in constant de-escalation. Someone in our—everyone in our classroom is kind of somewhere, you know, somewhere and needing some form of de-escalation. So, this past year, I had multiple new care professionals in the classroom, and there was a big learning curve for the staff. And with the change in staff, one of my students was pretty anxious about the new members of our family, and in order to gain some predictability, he kind of put them to the test to see how they were going to respond to his behavior. So, you know, in those beginning days and weeks, he lived in that Anxiety stage and would quickly make his way through Defensive into Risk Behavior within a matter of seconds.

So, he was having a particularly difficult morning, and the response from some staff members was making things worse. It was no one's fault, but I kind of needed to push the reset button and I asked all of the staff members to leave the room. You know, they have their walkie-talkies. I knew that if I needed help, they would come running with a push of a button so I felt safe in making that decision. What I didn't know is that instead of leaving, my newest staff member stepped behind the tall cubbies in the classroom so I couldn't see him but he was still in the room. And I started working to de-escalate the student, and for the first few seconds of my verbal attempt, it wasn't helping either. So I just stopped talking. You know, this is kind of autism 101. And all of my interactions became nonverbal. And he knew exactly what I needed him to do using point prompts and visuals with my body language and timers and he quickly gained control of himself and was able to completely get back on track and put things together that had been upended.

And when I knew we had reached Tension Reduction and I nonverbally re-established that communication with him, I let my staff know they could come back one at a time, and, you know, we finished the day, we sat down after the students had left to debrief, and that's when I found out one of my staff members didn't leave the room. He was so interested in finding out what had happened because he couldn't see anything, but he couldn't hear anything either, since intervention had been done in complete silence. And it was a great

learning opportunity for him, for the rest of the staff, and then [it] ultimately made things better for the students because we found a strategy that continued to work.

Terry: Excellent. And do you find that debriefing is a very critical part of how you use CPI?

Briona: Yeah. We're debriefing every day, whether at the—a situation where physical intervention was needed or, you know, that we're observing some new behaviors and need to really come together to help figure out a new way to de-escalate, so yeah. It is essential in the success of the team and the success of the students.

Terry: I see. What do you think are some of the greatest challenges and rewards that you associate with working with kids on the spectrum today?

Briona: My greatest strength in working with students is being able to work with their parents and their families. So I have daily communication with all of my parents and I love sharing with them the growth that is happening at school. But when I hear back from them that they also see that language is increasing in the home and they see that the behavior is decreasing, or the visual system that I helped them put into place is starting to work or, you know, a park-it basket for a student who throws everything he can get his hands on is starting to work at home, too. It makes me feel happy for the student that real learning has occurred, and that positive change is taking place for just a better life of this child because it's happening across environments.

I'd say my biggest challenge, especially working with the younger population, is being mindful and present in the moment with them but also focusing on what they need in order to be as independent as possible as an adult. So it's hard to look at a five-year-old and think, "What is this going to look like when they're 25?" But it's necessary to focus on what we're currently doing and setting them up for adult life that can be meaningful.

Terry: Have you found that your ability to rationally detach has gotten much stronger over the last couple of years?

Briona: Yes. You know, in the beginning, especially those first couple of years, it was difficult, but through training, through CPI, through a new belief system and finding those outlets, [it became easier]. You know, the story about me thinking my classroom's an eight-hour performance, like that, you know, that's a lighthearted way to approach a really difficult environment, and I would encourage others, whatever you can pull from, whatever helps to get you through that day and get through those moments, well, then stick to it.

Terry: I understand you're one of two Certified Instructors now in your district, and I'm wondering how frequently you train, who is trained, and what are your greatest successes and challenges.

Briona: Yeah, so Nancy Kocsis and I are the two trainers in our district and we hold trainings one to two times per month starting at the end of August, when we train all of the new specialized staff members that are hired into the district. So we train about 300 staff members each year and that includes paraprofessionals, ancillary staff, general and special educators, and administrators. It's great to see, you know, general educators, special educators, and administrators all sitting down in the same room at the same table and what we talk about applies to all of them. You know, we're not changing the training based on who's sitting in front of us. They're coming to us and the training just applies.

Terry: Do you find them embracing CPI terminology as a common language?

Briona: Yeah, I do, and that's the greatest thing, is the more people that come into our training session, [the more] are leaving and supporting each other in their buildings, supporting each other and their teams on that language. And we're encouraging them when, you know, when some language changed with CPI, that once it is no longer an "Acting-Out Person" but "Risk Behavior," we encourage each other to—if you hear somebody using that old terminology that kind of maybe sounded like it was placing blame or, you know—really to remind each other. And as trainers, we ask our participants to do the same for us.

So it's great to see full teams and full staff coming to trainings and going back to their buildings and really adopting this as a belief system within their team and within their school.

Terry: That's heartening to hear that you actually see that change happening as people bring the training back to their own schools and classrooms. In our pre-interview, you told me this, and it relates to that, that some people in your district were still thinking about CPI training as "takedown" or "restraint" training. It sounds like you're really starting to change that impression.

Briona: Yeah. You know, because we have an Autism Center Program in our district, I think there are people that think the reason we have CPI trainers is to train the staff members that work specifically in the Center Program or work with students in special education, but that's really the farthest from the truth. So, you know, CPI provides the de-escalation and intervention techniques that *all* school personnel need on a daily basis and it allows participants to be more confident in dealing with difficult behavior which is happening in every classroom, *every* classroom. Not just classrooms that have students with IPs, not just classrooms, you know, with students that are on the autism spectrum. Every single classroom.

There are difficult behaviors happening, and it's really cool to see more and more administrators in our trainings because you can tell by their questions and their conversations that they're truly thinking about specific students in their classrooms, probably the students that keep coming down to their office, you know, multiple times a day. And then, you know, maybe the next month, we see that general educator that has

that student and then we're seeing full teams and full staff. So, you know, we're really encouraging participants to interrupt and redirect others when they hear the myth that CPI is takedown training and instead telling them, you know, that this is training based on basic principles of humanity and that really is the furthest from takedown training.

Terry: That's great. And you've kind of answered my next question, but if you could speak to it just a bit more, that would be great. I mean, you've talked about the change that you feel CPI training is bringing to your district, and it sounds like it's influencing the culture overall.

Briona: Yeah. I mean, it is a beautiful thing when there are so many different learners within a school district and within a building and within a classroom. And what CPI has given all of its participants is that common belief, that common approach, a common understanding of human behavior and common language to use with individuals in our care. So, you know, we are doing everything we know how to do to make sure that every student entering the door to their school is going to be safe while they're in it.

And CPI ensures that each student's *Care, Welfare, Safety, and Security*<sup>SM</sup> is what drives the decisions from its participants. So, the more people believing that, the more people not only wanting what's best for students, but truly doing what's best for students, the better. It sounds corny, but the better our world is going to be because these students right now that are in our classrooms that we are influencing, they are our future and we know we need more of what CPI is teaching out there. Like everyone—if the whole world was trained in CPI, it'd be a better place. I do believe.

Terry: Well said! Thank you. It's great to see that the CPI approach, the behavioral models and basic concepts that have been so resonant to yourself and to other people there in your district—that you see them as a value not just in your classroom, with the unique challenges that teaching kids on the spectrum brings, but that these techniques and these approaches truly are exportable to the universal human experience.

Briona: Yeah.

Terry: Yeah. And to close today, Briona, I know you started a Twitter chat earlier this year. Would you tell our listeners about that?

Briona: Yeah, so I was feeling like I needed to grow professionally and, you know, I was searching for education Twitter chats. There's multiple. Every single hour, you know, you can hop onto Twitter and find an education Twitter chat that's going on, and I was missing the special education piece of that. There's a lot of good information out there, but not a lot that applies to me and my classroom. And so I wanted to start a Twitter chat and really start getting dialog going with leaders in the world of special education. And so earlier this year, I started a Twitter chat with the hashtag "s-i-s-s-chat," and every month, I have a moderator from a different area in the world of special ed who poses some questions out

there and people are able to answer and get dialog going. And it's been a great experience so far and I'm excited to start it back up at the end of this month.

Terry: All right, great. Fantastic. Well, thank you for sharing that with us. Do you have any closing thoughts today, Briona, someone you'd like to thank in particular?

Briona: Of course, I want to thank Nancy Kocsis because, you know, she really has put CPI out there into our district, taken CPI and put it out there into our district, and it is beautifully impacting students. And so I want to thank her and thank you, Terry, for the opportunity.

Terry: Thank you so much. My guest today has been Briona McKinney. She's a special educator with the Harlan Elementary School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Thank you so much, Briona.

Briona: Thank you.

Terry: And thank you all for listening.