Podcast: Expanding Inclusive Learning Environments

Dr. Gretchen Stewart, a long time public school teacher, instructional coach and teacher educator, shares insights from her dissertation research which involves working with worldwide experts in brain development, learning, cognition, and movement, leading to the identification of 27 elements that experts felt should be included in an inclusive school where movement is a central part of how all students maximize learning. As she prepares to put her learning into practice in a new school, Smart Moves Academy, Gretchen highlights directions for coaches and administrators in all settings.'

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTSteve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an

excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.
Steve: 00:28 Expanding inclusive learning environments. Joining us on the podcast today is Dr. Gretchen Stewart. Gretchen is the founder of an upcoming school, Smart Moves Academy. Her dissertation research involved working with worldwide experts in the area of brain development, learning cognition movement, leading to the identification of 27 elements that experts felt should be included in an exclusive school where movement is a central part of how all students maximize learning. Gretchen, thanks so much for giving us your time here today.

Gretchen: 01:08 Thank you so much for having me, Steve. It's a pleasure.

Steve: 01:11 Would you start off by sharing a little bit of your background and what led to your study and the founding of smart moves academy?

Gretchen: 01:20 Sure, absolutely. I've spent fast 20 years now in public education. I've taught in urban schools in Minneapolis and Atlanta. I've taught in charter schools in St. Paul. So and I've worked in general education and special education as a teacher and administrator at levels K-12. So I've had a pretty extensive career in education and I'm also a parent. So 15 years ago, I became a parent to a wonderful young man who was later diagnosed with autism and throughout my time in education, and then, definitely as being on the other side of the table as a parent then, and being involved in special education, I just always felt that there are things that we can be doing differently, there are things that we might be able to be doing better. I've always been drawn to these big, massive, complex problems in education.

Gretchen: 02:24 In the environmental education world, they call these problems "wicked problems," because they're just so

entangles with many variables. So like the persistent achievement gap in the United States, between socioeconomic levels, between students with learning differences and students without. Those problems have persisted for generations and those are things that I've been drawn to because I, myself, as a teacher, as a teacher educator, I just see our schools and our teachers and administrators putting everything we have and solving these problems, but yet they persist. So those are kind of the impetus for me going and getting my PhD and then founding this new school.

Steve: 03:07 So Gretchen, a lot of our listeners are instructional coaches working in classrooms with teachers and school administrators. Can you talk about some of the things that they should be encouraging teachers to implement in their classrooms based on what we know about the brain and movement and learning?

Gretchen: 03:31 Absolutely. And I love instructional coaches. I've been a senior instructional coach for the last three years focusing on inclusive practices, high leverage strategies and bringing my own flavor to that with movement, the brain learning and cognition. So what I would say to an instructional coach after you've obviously observed the environment, is to see where you can create some more opportunities for movement. And this is at any developmental age to any grade level. Our biophysiological makeup wants to move. It wants to be active. And so actually the moment that we sit down, there are chemicals in our brain that are telling our brain to go to sleep. So a lot of schools have instituted things called like brain breaks where kids will get up for two minutes and then sit down. But I'm saying that we need to go beyond that. So instructional coaches, helping teachers figure out how to get more movement out of their school day.

Gretchen: 04:36 So transitions is a great area. There's a lot of schools that have things on the hallway floors now, they call them, I think, a sensory path where students will in

young for younger students hop, jump, skip, crawl take their hands and move them along the wall while counting or whatever. That's a great thing to institute and you can do that inside of a classroom. There's a lot of ideas around that that you could use. If all a teacher has is just chairs as the seating option, I would absolutely recommend that you help that teacher, whether by going to administration or whatever you need to do, get some different seating options that move. So there's school chairs that rock, there are bouncy balls, there are items that you can put onto a desk so kids can swing their feet.

Gretchen: 05:30 And I would also say that standing up, and Steve, you know with the pandemic, we've seen a lot of people work at home, a lot of school at home and we've seen actually in the retail world, the demand for standing desks has gone through the roof. So helping kids be able to stand up to do things. Using clipboards to make that happen if you don't have standing desks in your classroom. And the instructional coach, too, I would say too that, if you could help that teacher figure out how to move their lesson more versus standing at the front, or even if they're using station teaching, helping them figure out how to add movement to that.

Steve: 06:09 I know that COVID led schools as they opened back up to be doing more learning outside. You see that as a benefit, an element that we have be trained to hold on to more?

Gretchen: 06:24 Absolutely. When I did my dissertation and I had these 40 experts from around the world, they came up with these 27 elements that a school that was focused on embodied learning or optimizing brain performance through movement would have. One of the top things was creating outdoor space for learning that encourages movement and adding to recess time, adding to play time. So that falls definitely in line with what is recommended and so when you take the class outside, don't just go outside and sit down. That's great just

being outside, but actually taking that class outside and adding some elements of movement. If you're just getting started, maybe before the actual lesson happens, you play a movement game, you play a team movement game, or you just give students little short movement assignments, like striking poses or playing red light green light. That's a really simple game that involves movement.

Steve: 07:32 Great. Gretchen, I wonder if you'd talk about some strategies who ought to be increasing or implementing in our schools to increase the inclusive practices that are needed to increase success for all learners. And I'm wondering if you might give it to us from two vantage points. What are some of the "easily doable" things that just maybe take a difference in our thinking? And then what are some things that are perhaps a a little more complex and things that we gotta be working towards – kind of the changes that you think we should be looking to bring into our schools?

Gretchen: 08:17 Yeah, absolutely. Well, my focus is going to be movement so I think that it's a good place to start. So taking it from maybe just the immediate, what you can do in your classroom, or what coaches can help teachers do is, it's been over the years that a signal of being on task is that your physical body is kind of in a small space and you're you're quiet and you're looking at the thing and you're being on task. That's totally contrary, really, to a lot of students who have identified learning differences and we're seeing a lot more, even kids without labels that have issues with attention and sitting still, and all of those things is prevalent. So, I would say, if you could just take a step one degree to the right and realize that being on task and being engaged doesn't necessarily, or doesn't usually mean that you're seated and quiet. Being on task can look very different for every child in your classroom.

Gretchen: 09:28 And if we can take that perspective shift, I think that we can make environments that are more conducive to

every kind of learner and helping other kids see that too. Because a lot of times what happens with children with learning differences is that they are set apart because they are moving and everyone else is not. And that becomes something that we attach a stigma to, or that's not what's expected. So in normalizing movement, we are immediately making our classrooms more inclusive. I would say that on the other side of that, some more sophisticated steps and this is probably geared towards administrators or curriculum developers is that, I think that we as educators and even me as a parent, I want to know why I'm doing something. If I know why I'm doing something, I'm more apt to do it if I have that why and that why moves me.

Gretchen: 10:29 So for example, a study was recently published that looked at, using a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine, or FMRI machine, looking at two year olds who are exposed for long periods of time to iPads and phones and two year olds who are not. And the two year olds who have more exposure to digital devices actually have differences in the functional connectivity in their brain. It's not as good as the kids who aren't on iPads and digital devices all day. So me as a parent, knowing that, when I read that study, actually, Steve, I started a whole plan that would cut down the iPad time, which was hard because it was a pandemic. But if teachers and administrators know what movement can do for the brain, I think you're more apt to take those steps and to learn more. So I would say that in that kind of upper echelon of what we do, it has to do with professional development around the foundations, the biophysiological foundations for learning. Reflexes, the brain, the spine. Teachers aren't generally learned in these areas because it's not something we've been exposed to. So that would be my recommendation.

Steve: 11:53 Yeah. In other words, let's educate the educators and then let them use what they learned to serve kids in the best ways that we can.

Steve: 12:04 Absolutely.

Steve: 12:04 Last question, I'm wondering if you'd give some thoughts on what should we be doing as educators to support the parents of students
who have have learning differences?

Gretchen: 12:20 I think parents are constantly overwhelmed with all these things, and then in your mind, you're always also thinking, what can I do better? What can I do more? So I always look for things that are easy to do, because I think that we get more compliance or more willingness if it's not an extra thing. So this is a really cool idea that came out in my dissertation from Andy Daley Smith. He is an expert in movement learning and cognition in schools in the United Kingdom. And he talked about replacing all homework with movement homework. But I think that for me, and taking small steps, that if you don't give homework, maybe call it something else and give your parents and your families kind of an expectation that the child comes in and talks about what they did at home over the weekend or during the week that had a movement focus.

Gretchen: 13:22 We often tell our parents read at home with your child 20 minutes every night. What about move at home with your child for 20 minutes every night? So taking a walk and taking data on that. There's a lot of curricular connections that you can do with homework. Making a family outing on the weekend that has to do with movement. Doing things inside of your home that have to do with movement. So I think that having homework expectations related or that include movement would be amazing for families. Something that I haven't talked about, but the actual science around movement is that, if you take a 20 minute brisk walk or if you jog, or if you involve yourself in some physical activity that gets the heart rate going, there are positive neurochemicals that are being created and that natural mood enhancer lasts for like four to six hours. So when we move and if we kind of help

our families do that, we're really creating a great positive mental environment.

Steve: 14:34 My mind's just running to us, for a starter, adding a family movement night at school. We tend to have a reading night, a math night and a science fair night and a family movement night may be a step in the right direction.

Gretchen: 14:54 I love it. I think we'll do that at Smart Moves.

Steve: 14:59 Well, Gretchen, thank you so much. Would you share with folks the easiest way for them to connect to you with with questions they might have?
Gretchen: 15:07 Absolutely. You can definitely email me at gretchen@smartmovesacademy.org. We also have a Facebook page, Smart Moves Academy, Tampa. And then coming soon, will be our website, which will have a lot of educational resources and things for parents to do.

Steve: 15:26 Well, Gretchen, thank you so much. I've really enjoyed connecting with you and and learning and I'll look forward to us repeating a podcast after the school is up and open, and you've got some of the great stories of what kids are experiencing to share with us.

Gretchen: 15:46 Absolutely. And I'll bring a parent and a teacher and a student along.

Steve: 15:49 I'd love. Let's, let's make that a definite plan. That would absolutely be perfect.

Gretchen: 15:54 Great. Thank you.

Steve: 15:56 Thank you so much.

Steve: 15:57 Take care.

Steve: 16:00 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And

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