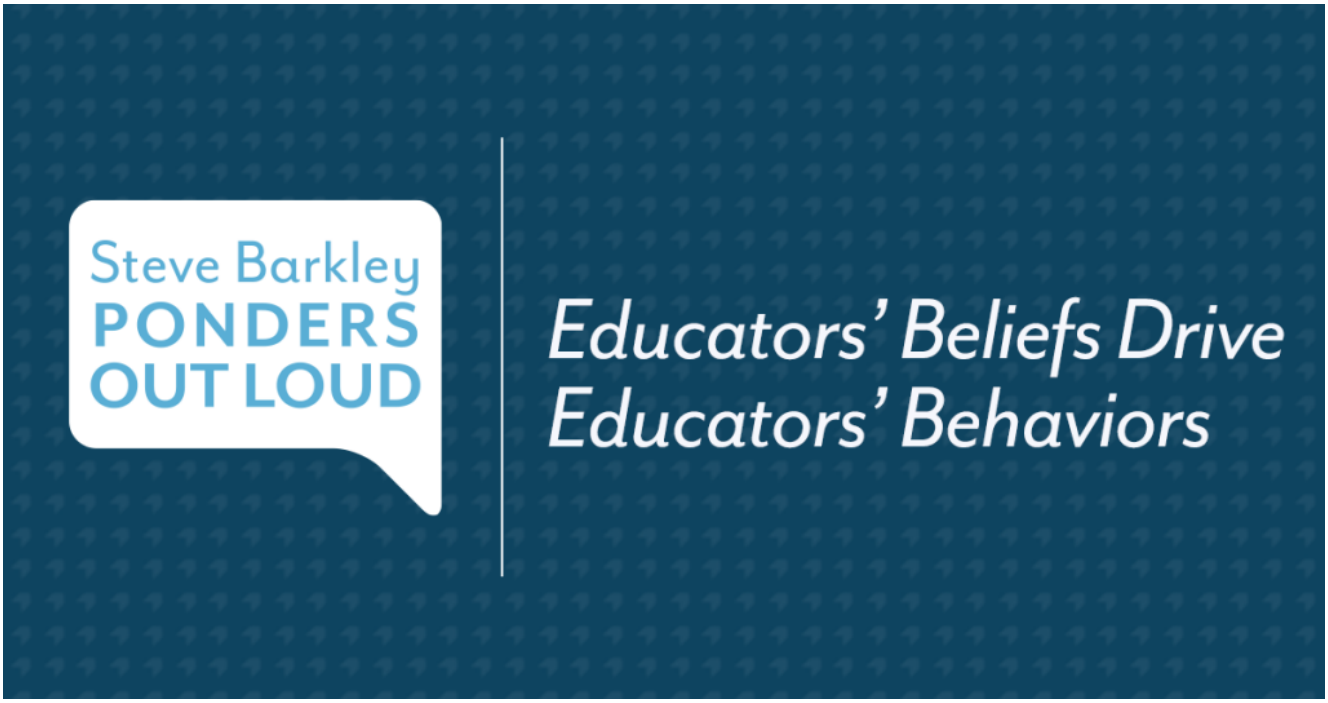
Podcast: Educators' Beliefs Drive Educators' Behaviors



Kyle Coppes, a secondary principal, shares the thinking behind an opinion piece he wrote titled, **"Student Laziness Is a Myth. Here's Why."** – "The belief that laziness exists will limit the behavior of any teacher who encounters it, and that is harmful. Essentially, it is a teacher's get-out-of-jail-free card: If a student does not complete a task on time, and if laziness is the culprit, then giving a zero or assigning detention is the right tool for the job." How do you explore teachers' beliefs and generate reflection upon those beliefs as part of coaching?

Read Kyle's article, "Student Laziness Is a Myth. Here's Why." here.

Visit Kyle's website here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.260] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you have a challenge to guide continuous teacher growth that promotes student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from our experienced guests and insights that I've gathered across many years. I'm thrilled you're here. Thanks for listening.

[00:00:26.590] – Steve

Educators' beliefs drive educators' behaviors. Joining our podcast today is Dr. Kyle Coppes, the secondary school principal at Metropolitan School Frankfurt in Germany. He's been a teacher, Department Coordinator, IB Coordinator, Assistant Principal and Principal at schools in Africa, Asia, and Europe for the past 15 years. Kyle wrote an opinion piece in Education Week that caught my attention and led to an invitation to him to join the podcast. The piece Kyle wrote was titled, "Student Laziness is a Myth. Here's Why." Welcome, Kyle.

[00:01:11.690] – Kyle

Thank you, Steve. It's an absolute pleasure to be here.

[00:01:14.790] – Steve

I'm delighted that you are, and I'm delighted to talk about the piece that you wrote. It just really connected with me. I'm wondering, for starters, if you would tell people a little bit about the Metropolitan School of Frankfurt and your principalship there.

[00:01:30.740] – Kyle

Absolutely. So I probably serve here as the secondary school principal in my fourth academic year. And it's interesting, we

often bring in prospective parents into what we call Connect with MSF Zoom calls and we talk about who we are and what we do and why is it that we do what we do. And the thing that I like to say, first and foremost, education is a relationship business. It's about people. It's about connections and interactions. And the by-product of that is a high performing academic institution. We, as educators here at the Metropolitan School, really try and focus all of our thoughts, feelings, energy, attention, and interactions on making meaningful connections with students and getting them to achieve their personal best. And as an end result, we send students off to their top choice universities. We've got students studying currently at Harvard and Yale and Oxford. And I say those things not as a marker of we are an elite school only providing elite education. But when you do what you do for the right reason, kids end up achieving their personal best and that's what we're all about.

[00:02:40.840] – Steve

So I want to talk a little bit about the reason that your article caught my attention. Years back, as part of teacher workshops that I facilitated, and I worked around problem solving with teachers or teachers focusing on changing student behaviors, I frequently stressed the need for starting our conversation with a description of student behaviors rather than what I called a conclusion about a student. Often when a teacher would give some negative adjective to describe this student, I would respond back to the teacher, well, that's a conclusion. So give me some of the descriptions of the behaviors that you're seeing and understanding those behaviors are an important beginning place as to where you want to move. And so that history of mine jumped out at me when I just read the title, "Student Laziness as a Myth." So I'm wondering for the listeners if you'd walk them through the approach that you took to putting forth that idea of student laziness being a myth.

[00:03:56.000] – Kyle

Absolutely. And I'll warn you and your listeners, I'm I'll be going to take the scenic route. I might meander a bit, but in the end, I hope I get to the answer of your question. Over my career, I've had the pleasure of working with amazing educators. I think all educators want what's best for their students. As a hiring manager, now, one of the questions I ask in my interview process is, what is your personal philosophy of education? Why do you do what you do? And you'd be hard-pressed to hear any educator say anything other than I want what's best for my students. That is the default in many iterations, but that is the default of the driving philosophy of most educators. And yet, I think there are certain underlying beliefs that often drive behaviors that are counterproductive to that aim. I mentioned a few in the piece. For example, if as an educator, you believe in the power of formative feedback, you're likely to take a significant amount of time to sit with the child, confer one-to-one target interventions that really shift the needle and help that child improve. If as an educator, you believe that you are the authority in the classroom, you're probably going to have really rigid behavior management protocols in place.

[00:05:20.820] – Kyle

If you think a homeschool connection is the marker of a high-achieving school, you're going to reach out to parents, give praise, point out shortfalls when they happen. Regardless, ultimately, your beliefs drive your behaviors. For me, so that's one foundational piece. The next bit is this idea of the word lazy. Again, I'll meander for a bit, but I'll come back around. I think words matter. Words are important. They have connotations, they have denotations. And the word lazy, the denotation, the definition definition is averse to labor or indisposed to action or effort. Words like idle, inactive, or slothful, all comprise that definition. But the connotation of the word lazy is extraordinarily negative. And I think for

educators, the connotation is if my child is lazy, they are undeserving of my effort. It's a shortfall of theirs. If I have a child who's lazy in my classroom, that's my get-out-of-jail free card. I do not need to take action, inquire, poke or prod that child to figure out what is it that stood in the way of their learning.

[00:06:42.840] – Steve

I'd be wasting my effort.

[00:06:46.300] – Kyle

Absolutely. When we have student of concern meetings or student study teams, across all schools I've been at, whenever teachers come together to talk about students, there is the intention to be present and to have meaningful conversations. But oftentimes the default can be a bit cynical or it can be a bit flippant about this child is lazy or "these kids" – it's another pet peeve of mine is when we talk about students with that pejorative type language. And so how I came to this really was a coaching conversation with an individual teacher and ultimately this teacher said, "well, this kid is just lazy. Just lazy." That's the terminology. The thing is that this teacher was an amazing pedagog. The scope and open sequence of this gentleman's work was fantastic, leading activities were accessing prior knowledge and pushing kids. He had multiple unsolicited parent letters at the end of whether it was the IJCSE program or the IB program, how much he's done for their children. Loved, respected, and yet he said, "this kid is just lazy." And so I thought to myself, how can I break through? How can I reach this his teacher? And in my head, I knew that he was very logical.

[00:08:20.600] – Kyle

And I'm thinking, how can I create a logical argument? If A, then B, if B, then C, therefore, if A, then C, how can I get to his logical brain? And honestly, it was one of those

moments where the light's dimmed and a single beam of light came in, and I just thought to myself, Pascal's wager. This is going to be the thing that's going to convince this guy about the fact that student laziness is a myth, or at the very least, that he would benefit from believing that it's a myth. I sat down and I took a scratch piece of paper and I drew up Pascal's Wager to talk about this idea from this, I don't know, 15th century philosopher about the belief in God. It's a simple one. It's a two by two matrix. If God exists or it doesn't exist, there's two simple outcomes. He either does or does not exist. If individual's belief is, again, quite simple, you either do believe or you don't believe. So it's a four square matrix. And for Pascal, he said, there is everything to gain and nothing to lose from believing in God. You either have eternal salvation or eternal damnation in the case that God exists based on your belief.

[00:09:33.750] – Kyle

And if he doesn't exist, okay, you have wasted faith, and you might have the ability to, given I told you so, at a coffee party, know with your friends, right? And so I thought, okay, if I pull out God and put in student laziness, this is going to be the thing to make this teacher believe that it's a safe bet for him to believe that laziness is a myth.

[00:09:57.170] – Steve

Very cool. So the word that was connected in my mind with that is teachers describing students as unmotivated, and then the teacher either waiting for them to get motivated or if they come back motivated, then I'll put my effort in, but not seeing the teacher's job as a way of creating the motivation.

[00:10:24.360] – Kyle

Absolutely. Again, absolute respect to all educators. It's oftentimes a thankless job, and it's demanding, it's mentally draining, it's emotionally draining. But I also often hear, I

shouldn’t be the hardest working person in the room, that I need the students to come my way. And I would flip that and say, at the very least, you are the spark. You are driving the bus in this classroom, and you have the ability to take certain directions. And if it’s an issue of motivation, we need to find ways to tap into student motivation, regardless of the content, regardless of the concept that’s being taught. That at the core, I think, is the foundation of what education is about.

[00:11:18.100] – Steve

One of the ways that I’ve approached this with people in the past is that you don’t have to look very far into people’s autobiographies of famous people to find a comment that a elementary teacher made on their report card that they weren’t going to amount to anything. And so I used to use the description that I would make my teaching career be built around being sure that there was no kid of mine who was going to become famous and hold me accountable for some statement I made to their parents back in a conference. But I used to describe that to be a great educator, you really have to be an optimist.

[00:12:06.160] – Kyle

Absolutely.

[00:12:06.550] – Steve

You have to be able, in the most difficult parts of teaching, you have to be able to see an outcome when there isn’t current data to support it. Absolutely. You can look at a kid’s background and family situation and current actions and behaviors and be predicting of the kid’s success. But it’s the really powerful educator who can sit down with the student and you don’t have any of those pieces to hang on to, and you can still paint that picture. And it’s often painting one that the student isn’t seeing either.

[00:12:43.920] – Kyle

Absolutely. And it oftentimes, is far simpler than we might realize. It's usually showing care, showing concern, ensuring that that child feels that they belong, that they have worth, they have meaning. And so those personal connections are extraordinarily important. And as a secondary school principal, I think a lot of times educators get so bogged down in the content delivery, and they will point to, Have you seen how large my content is? I do not have time to XYZ, fill in the blank, right? But we buy back so much of that time if we make those connections. We really do pay it forward, otherwise, we are banging our head against the wall of this idea of this unmotivated pack of students, and then we just plow through the content. And then, of course, in the end, we all lose, right?

[00:13:40.340] – Steve

A lot of my coaching is based on what I call uncovering the teacher's agenda. And part of uncovering a teacher's agenda is really getting to a teacher's belief system. And I think that was reinforced for me as I read through this, that I think teachers at times make statements that don't accurately fit the teacher's own belief system. And they may even take on actions and behaviors that don't actually fit their belief system. And part of what the reflection process is that occurs in coaching is the opportunity for the teacher to reflect back on where that true value system is.

[00:14:28.770] – Kyle

Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree with you. I think that is why coaching is so profoundly impactful, and particularly if that's the approach that one takes, because we, I think as educators, pull out that belief system at opportune times, i. e., when we're applying for jobs and when we go through an interview and we share it, we color it up, we dust it off, and we put it, we dangle it out there, and then it fades. School

hits, and we get bogged down in the day to the day, creating assessments, making lesson plans, et cetera. But to bring those back and to keep them in the forefront and to remind yourself and going through that reflection process is so impactful.

[00:15:14.240] – Steve

I'm just working with a high school that's currently implementing their first work with instructional coaching. And as I met with the administrator and teacher leaders, we uncovered that we've got to do a bigger engagement of the teachers in the compelling why for what we're looking at. And the compelling why for them really comes down to they want their students to have an experience in the learning process that an insufficient number of students are currently having. They described it as an excitement for learning, fun in learning, being challenged by learning. It's going to conversations to get teachers to recognize that that is part of their belief system. And so their decision-making process should be influenced by that belief system. And now the reason to engage in collegial work and engaging with coaches is to be able to get closer to a classroom where that belief system you have is present.

[00:16:26.490] – Kyle

That's fantastic.

[00:16:28.350] – Steve

I'm wondering in your administrative work if there's times that you think school administrators need to consider whether we've got some myths in our labels of staff.

[00:16:48.040] – Kyle

It's a fantastic question. And I do think that administrators have, in the way that we lead teams, similar myths in the way that teachers lead classrooms. A former school director of

mine would push back on what he termed the designated dissenters. And it was those who seemed to swim upstream. Whenever there was a new initiative or a new program, they would be the ones to balk at it. They would be the ones to push back. And I think he leaned into this idea that they will exist and they will always exist. And they're ever present and I don't think that there was a value in the voice. Because, again, having worked across multiple contents, hundreds of educators, any one to one conversation with an educator is going to be a positive one in that they believe what they do is best for kids or they want to do what's best for kids. And so if and when they push back, it's because their needs are not being met in some fashion or another. And so we, as administrators, need to consider that and need to think, well, what is it programmatically that we're doing? What support systems we have or do we not have that is driving this behavior or this thought?

[00:18:05.200] – Kyle

So, yeah, I think there are myths that we also hold on to.

[00:18:09.520] – Steve

I describe that I have to have a picture in my mind that the teacher wants to make the best thing possible having happen for kids, even if the teacher's current actions and words aren't communicating that to me.

[00:18:28.980] – Kyle

Yes.

[00:18:29.550] – Steve

And for for me, that rings very similar. That kid's behaviors looks a whole lot like lazy, but thank God, I know that's a myth. It can't be that. It has to be something else.

[00:18:42.580] – Kyle

Has to.

[00:18:43.330] – Steve

And that's what's going to send me looking. So that teacher who's giving me as an administrator or coach that same dismissive response, I want to take on the same myth. They really aren't standing there at the door saying, I'm excited about doing less for kids that I'm I'm capable of doing. As soon as I make that assumption, then it allows me to take on the appropriate coaching behaviors.

[00:19:07.610] – Kyle

Absolutely.

[00:19:08.470] – Steve

If I get caught up in it, it's going to get in the way of me taking on my actions.

[00:19:13.530] – Kyle

Yeah, absolutely. I think that is a really strong foundation to work from as an administrator, presuming that positive intent, knowing that they do want what's best. There might be a number of issues that are getting in the way, but it's why we're here, too. We're here to support. We're here to make an environment where everyone can succeed, students, teachers, the whole team.

[00:19:41.850] – Steve

Well, Kyle, I really appreciate you first, doing the article and really appreciate the time for you on the podcast walking us through it. I will be sure to put the link to your article in the lead-in to the podcast so folks can find it. And I'm wondering, easy way that people might to check back with you if they have a question or would like to take the conversation further with you.

[00:20:06.360] – Kyle

Absolutely. You can find me on LinkedIn. I'm pretty active there. I will say not only do I serve as a secondary Principal here at Metropolitan School of Frankfurt, I'm also a bit of an entrepreneur and have started Ednovate, a platform where we provide professional development opportunities for Educators. And this idea of beliefs driving behaviors and finding purpose in education is really the theme of our Educator Conference that will be in November in Dubai. So have a look at the website and join us at the conference.

[00:20:44.990] – Steve

Tell us the website again.

[00:20:47.420] – Kyle

ednnovate.com

[00:20:52.700] – Steve

Okay. I'll put that in the lead-in as well. Thank you so much. Take care.

[00:20:59.240] – Kyle

Thanks, Steve. I appreciate it.

[00:21:03.090] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.