Podcast: Building PLC (Team) Effectiveness

Two teachers with experience as members of a high functioning team share some of the processes that were implemented as their team developed and now focuses on continued development. They explore the need for trust, tapping members' strengths, sharing responsibility, flexing the schedule, and planning for new members joining a team. A learning **community** for teachers and students.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [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. I'm thrilled you're here.
Steve: 00:31 Building PLC Team Effectiveness. I'm especially excited to share today's podcast around effective teaming. As those of you who listen to this podcast regularly know, I'm a big fan of teaming and always working in schools to promote it. A few years back, I had the opportunity to provide some coaching with the third grade team of teachers at the Western Academy of Beijing. I recently reconnected and heard how the team had progressed since then, and wanted all of you to hear about their practices and their learning. Joining us today are two members of the team, Angela Langlands and Nina Triado. Thanks so much, Nina and Angela for joining me.

Angela: 01:23 Thanks, Steve,

Nina: 01:24 Thanks for having us.

Steve: 01:25 I'm wondering if you'd start by just giving folks a quick sketch of your your background and the time that you've been at Western
Academy Beijing.

Angela: 01:36 Sure. Thanks again for having us. So, I'm Angela Langlands, and I've been at WAB for four years now, and I've been teaching overseas for really long time. I think we're approaching 20 years – in the Middle East, in Africa, in Southeast Asia and China, and been part of this community for four years. So really excited to share the iteration that we're currently experiencing.

Nina: 02:08 Hi everyone. Thank you, Steve, for having us. My name's Nina and I have been at WAB for – this is my third year. And prior to teaching at WAB, I was teaching in Argentina in Buenes Aires. And yeah, definitely not a long

list of schools like Angela, but I am very happy to be co-teaching with Angela here at WAB.

Steve: 02:30 Thanks so much for for taking the time to to connect with us here today. I'm wondering if one of you would kind of start us off with what's the design of teaming that that is in place at at Western Academy?

Angela: 02:49 So we're really, really privileged at, WAB – we don't call it Western Academy of Beijing, we just call ourself WAB. We're really lucky at WAB to have the opportunity to have a team of teachers, both homeroom or home-based teachers and learning support or an English as an additional language teachers on every team. Through kindergarten, which we call SG1 through to grade five in the elementary. And so that allows there to be a huge group of teachers with their eyes on all the students. And when you see things arising, you have your support services team as part of the co-planners and co-designers of curriculum to help and and adjust right away. So we're really lucky to have that. We and our grade three team are made up before homeroom teachers and, like I said, support services or learning support teacher and an EAL teacher. And so for us, having them be so integral in all of what we do is just really powerful. We also have a lot of additional support at the school with occupational therapy and speech therapy and a psychologist and counselors and so we're just really rich in services that we can offer the families in our community.

Steve: 04:09 Nina, prior to to coming to WAB, had you been in a school that functioned in a team setting?

Angela: 04:22 Yeah. So prior to teaching at WAB, I was in Argentina and I was the EAL teacher there. So I was working with a team of three
homeroom teachers, but we shared a learning support teacher across different grade levels. So it was, from my end, there was a lot more support, but the way that the school was structured, then it was more of like a push-in pull-out system

with a little bit of co-planning, whereas the way that we do things here at WAB, it's a lot more all hands on deck. All of the teachers are working together, co-planning, co-teaching, and it's so fluid in the way that we team at WAB.

Steve: 05:08 All hands on deck is a pretty good team team description from from when I use the word franchise, which are people come together and and they exchange ideas and strategies, but then they go back and they run their own run their own classroom.

Angela: 05:29 Yeah. Well, and right now, Steve, I mean this is not what you're asking, but we're only in our second week of school so we're
running our students through what we call the grade three bootcamp. And it includes meeting all of the teachers and recognizing that whether they're the learning support teacher on paper or the homeroom teacher on paper or the TA for the class on paper, they are your teacher and they are there to support you and they are there to offer insight into how you are as a learner. And all of us have power in creating a report card that is just well versed in this child. You have eight sets of eyes on this kid. How powerful is that? So no, there's no silos, there's no going back and doing our own franchising. I know that I would've been a happy parent to know my children were learning like that.

Steve: 06:25 So when I reconnected, we kind of came up with some topics that we had discussed initially when I was coaching and working with your team. So we pulled a couple of those out that I'd like you to respond to. So one of the one of the pieces that I had shared with you initially was the difference between what I call a PLC and a PWC. A PLC being that team that's learning together versus the PWC being that team that works together. And again, to make sure listeners, there's nothing bad about being a PWC, it's just different than the times that you're functioning as a PLC and they require different behaviors from the participants. So wanna

talk a little bit about how you applied those thoughts and where you've taken it, what you've done with it?

Nina: 07:25 Absolutely. I think from the conversation that we had with you that day, that was by far the biggest takeaway was like, it kind of made sense that it's two separate things that bring together the way that teachers teach. And I mean, we basically start the week off with one of our meetings, which is a professional working community meeting, a PWC meeting because we do have to talk about logistics events that are upcoming. If we've got leader testing or anything like that that needs to be discussed as a team in terms of dates. But we try and keep that to a bit of a shorter meeting and then we flow into the PLC meetings where we really just knuckle down and talk about curriculum groupings, the differentiation and then we have that input from the EAL teacher and the learning support teacher in that moment as we really just take time to think about what it is that our kids need in terms of learning, in teaching and learning.

Nina: 08:35 And then, we basically have set up a structure where we plan, we have a couple of meetings as a whole team so we're all on the same page and then we go off into our little partner, we kind of cluster up into smaller groups and let's say Angela and I will be on literacy for a six month period or whatever it is, three, six months and then we'll go off and plan literacy whilst the other two team members plan math. Someone else plans the unit of inquiry. And then at the end of the week, we come together for a last group meeting and share with the rest of the team what it is that is gonna happen the following week in terms of teaching and learning.

Angela: 09:23 Yeah. So that PLC has evolved into a couple things. It's kind of a divide and conquer idea where in your old silo classrooms, you
would have to organize all the learning for the whole day. Everything. Your social studies, your math, your reading, your unit of inquiry or whatever. Plus, you'd have to differentiate

for all your reading groups and your math levels and everything. And so we've divided and conquered the core ideas and really sketch it out. Plus, they get all the resources that we're gonna need and then they can really dig deep and think of some really cool out of the box thinking ideas, whether it's provocations or resources or timings or regrouping. And they can really dig deep and project out because we do it in a three week segment as well.

Angela: 10:16 Like, we will plan heavily for right now, but we'll project out a couple weeks so we can see where we're going. And because we trust each other as a team, I don't have to be involved in the minutiae of what the math team is planning for this next math unit because I know that what they're planning for me to teach – one, for me, I can teach and two, they are really, really skilled at it. And then the third part is they've spent so much time focusing on that curriculum area that what they're creating is thought out. It's going to be powerful and meaningful for all of our learners. And they trust the same out of me for a different subject. And it really is that divide and conquer.

Steve: 11:03 I wanna check on a phrase you used there. Because it's the question I frequently ask – it means the people who are planning need to know all the students well enough.

Angela: 11:14 So we know these students pretty well. So part of our weekly meetings are meetings just about students. Checking in on progress, red flags that we've noticed, I mean, anything from a parent email about something we need to be mindful of or "hey, did anyone notice that, you know, this kid is starting to get a little lethargic after lunch and that's when we do reading. So maybe we need to keep an eye on it, maybe we can flip reading a little bit and you know, again, put the kids in front of the timetable instead of the timetable in front of the kids." And so we take that into consideration at our team meetings. And really for the most part, it helps all of them. A shift in one thing has a knock

on effect to help so many students that that we have very rarely made some of these big concrete changes.

Angela: 12:12 But because I'm able to plan, say, literacy for the next two or three units, I can really dig deep in my differentiation because I'm working with the EAL teacher or I'm working with another literacy specialist and we can really focus in on some great, thoughtful activities and lessons that will hit most of our learners. It also allows us to do some real cool growth mindset tie-ins for some of these things because we're really mindful of that, considering the the community in which we're in at this time. So how can we maximize the most of our learning time in very creative in different ways? But I think at the bottom of it all is trust. If we didn't trust each other to co-teach and co-plan, this system wouldn't work.

Steve: 13:07 So how do you get trust?

Angela: 13:09 Great question. I think you just have to have the awesome group of people.

Steve: 13:16 I put that out there because I frequently will have people tell me that they can't do something because they don't have the trust.
And then my response is, well, by doing nothing you aren't gonna get the trust. So it's almost like you have to begin with some people who are willing to be vulnerable.

Angela: 13:40 Yeah. And I think you hit the nail on the head. The team that was selected to do this to be in the first iteration years ago, were hand selected because they were people who wanted to give it a go. And as that's evolved, now everyone has to give it a go. The school has said, this is the direction we're going in. It doesn't have to look the way we do it, but we find that the way we do it just makes our life easier in that we can share the load.

Nina: 14:11 I think having come this team that was already on

the role on the bandwagon of doing things like this, I came with that mindset of, okay, this is the way it is and I just saw how beneficial it was and I guess I also compared it to what I used to do, but I just saw just the benefits whereas we were using each other's skill sets.

Nina: 14:36 And so I feel really strongly in teaching multiplication and division – I'm happy to take this, whereas someone else in my team may not feel that confident or they're passionate about – if you're interested in one of the units of inquiry, go for it. If you feel passionate, it brings that extra level of excitement to the planning rather than having it be a burden and having to think about too many things. That divide and conquer has really just helped and that level of trust – we're all great teachers and I think it's for those who may not be where we are, it's that idea of, okay, just give one little thing a try. Try it with literacy, see how it works. Have flexible groups. Someone takes the higher groups, someone takes the mid, below, however you wanna group it in interest, whatever, but just try it with one small thing.

Nina: 15:35 See what works. And I mean, by no means what we're doing perfect, we are still learning. And at the end of every unit we just go, okay, this worked, this didn't, how can we reflect and change this for next year? It's a process, but yeah, starting with one little thing at a time.

Angela: 15:54 And I think that's it, right? It's the letting go of the control that teachers are so good at having, right? You have this little empire when you walk into your room and these little 18 faces look up at you and you're like, "hello." But we all let that go. We all let those egos go. We even converted our office space, which used to be for our learning support and EAL teachers, we created an office. It is our office. The classrooms are the students' classrooms.

Angela: 16:27 It's not my room, it is not Nina's room, it's their room. We don't even call it by our names anymore. We

actually gave them a color. Like I work in the blue room because during math I might work in the orange room or the green room. And so we like those little things of letting go give trust to show people, I don't need things a special way in this room. Yes, Nina does like to use orange pen. We all know that. So we make sure there's an orange pen, but that's because you care and that's showing empathy and concern to a colleague. But it is about just letting go and taking the small baby steps that you can. So one of the things that we did or they did a few years ago before Nina and I were on the team is they started having doing conjoined assemblies.

Angela: 17:16 So two or three classes would get together and share the learning that the whole community did at different times of the day because
they still worked in silos, but they would just share the learning together in an assembly. And already, it changed the mindset of teachers a little bit. Then things like birthdays. We started community birthdays. Instead of every kid bringing in cupcakes for their 18 friends in Miss Angela's classroom, it turned into, we're gonna bake cupcakes and we're gonna share it with everybody in the community on the last Friday of the month and we're gonna celebrate all of you. And those little mind shifts have shown the kids that I am not the only teacher they can trust. Nina's not the only one they can trust. They can trust all of us. We're a safe place to be.

Steve: 18:05 Well, you already hinted a little bit at scheduling and I know when we had talked earlier, you you shared that that was, that was an area where you did some rethinking. You wanna walk us into that?

Angela: 18:18 Sure. Oh, I'm trying think exactly how you said it.

Steve: 18:22 I can tell you because it's a line I frequently use when I get asked about what's the best schedule to have. My response is always

the same: when the instruction is driving the schedule rather than the schedule driving instruction, that's the best schedule.

Angela: 18:39 So the only thing we heard differently – it's the same idea, but we put students in front of the learning.

Steve: 18:49 Yes, okay. That works.

Angela: 18:51 Students drive the timetable. The timetable does not drive what we do.

Steve: 18:56 Powerful.

Angela: 18:57 And so what we would get our grade three timetable, there's six little boxes throughout the day. After mentor meeting, they go to languages and there's two boxes, and then they have break and then there's two boxes, and then they go for lunch and then there's some more boxes. We got rid of the boxes and we melded the boxes into segments of time. So we look at it as three big chunks of time that we have everyday to do community learning. And just by doing that and relinquishing the need to compartmentalize the learning, like open your mouth, open your mouth, now close it. Now you have to be a writer. Close it. Now you have to go to lunch. We just decided go slow to go fast.

Angela: 19:44 So we're going spend this hour in literacy, all kinds of things surrounding literacy. And then when it's almost time for break time, we're gonna calmly tell you to pack it up, put it away, you'll go play at break time and then you can we'll reset you when you return. And by doing that, people look at us and go, well, how do you get it done? Well, because we chunked it differently and we're not spending time with kids losing stuff and having to open and close and shift in mood. We're giving them the time that they need to process to go slow to reflect. I think it's genius. And that was thanks to Steve Barkley.

Nina: 20:26 And I just wanna jump on that quickly. And I think that flexibility has also allowed us to then go, okay, well the students, they're working really well. This particular group of students works well for math in the morning, let's do more math lessons in the morning. But then we might have literacy in the afternoon and then we realize, oh, actually, for this next unit, let's flip it around and do literacy in the morning, math midday, unit of inquiry in the afternoon. So it just gives out that flexibility based on the unit that we're teaching, the groups that we've got and it's really, yeah, that flexibility without that fixed structure has just changed the way that we do things completely.

Steve: 21:10 It's powerful when you said you put the word student there because I've started a whole lot of years ago that as soon as I looked at a schedule that said you had to be at music at at 10:47 , you don't get a doctor's appointment for 10:47. Just the numbers suggested that the tracking of the numbers was more critical and more important to the to the people than the people.

Angela: 21:46 So one of the other things that we've done is we've created a space on our Friday, which we call Friday Flex, which is flexible time for students to use in a kind of a more self-directed way. And we train them up for this. It's not like they get this on day one because they're not ready. But the Friday flex is used for kids who just need more time to finish things or they just need a little bit of a touch up. They didn't quite understand this or a big chunk of kids were sick. And this is meaningful things. It's foundation for the what comes next. And so we can be really flexible as a team to honor what those students need. That said, there's also been some specialist teachers who have wanted to push into our Friday flex time.

Angela: 22:42 Nina you wanna talk about that?

Nina: 22:42 When specialist teachers have – when we shared

that we were doing this, they go, oh, I would actually really like to work with this particular group of students. They needed a little bit more extra running practice or their javelin wasn't right, can we just borrow them for a little bit longer? The performing arts teacher wanted them to do a little bit more. So we've opened the schedule for them to take the students that they need. And that's just been really well received and they appreciate that flexibility as well. There was one more thing that I was going to add was that on that Friday flex, for those students who maybe don't need the extra touch up or extra time, it's also a time for them to do some small personal projects.

Nina: 23:31 And so each classroom may be broken up into, okay, so the quiet space is at the end of the hall, the math group is in the next classroom, and then the students go, okay, what is it exactly that I need to do today? Where do I need to go? And the teachers change classrooms or students classrooms so there's that sense of choice accountability as well in the sense that, well, whatever teacher is in there makes sure that the students who are in there doing the right thing, but it is their choice. They're the ones who are deciding what is it that they need in that
particular time on that Friday.

Angela: 24:07 And for some people, it might look scattered and disconnected. But all of these things are come with incredible intentionality. They're really well thought out. Who's gonna be in what room? We look at what kids need that space and sometimes we assign, we say, nope, Nina, you have to go to this room because you need some extra support there. But most often it's student choice. There's some guiding sometimes and sometimes it's purposeful. But every decision that we made to create those blocks were done with intention and they were done with the student's interest. It's not about us and our comfortability, it's about them.

Steve: 24:50 It's really interesting because I worked with a

high school that implemented blocks and students end up with chunks of time for the student to decide. And their description is, you have freshman kids who have no idea how to make a decision of the best way to use that chunk of time because they haven't experienced it. And some of the parents were upset that they were afraid their kids would fall back while they were learning. And my suggest my suggestion to them was, well, we could learn it now as freshmen or we could wait until you're paying $50,000 a year at the university . And they discovered that they don't know how to make a decision about how to use their time. That's a pretty valuable skill for a third grader to begin to play a role in making some decision.

Angela: 25:49 Yeah. And then it's interesting too because then you find that at parent conferences you're having a similar conversation where the kid has said, I need to negotiate my after school schedule with my parents. This is what I want. This is what my parents want. And then as teachers we're thinking, well, how do we help compromise? Because the kid doesn't need four after school activities. The kid wants some time to read a book or to learn how to cook. So great, let's help your eight year old brain and your parents who have a very different idea of what after school should look like. Let's help you negotiate that modeled after what we do at school. Again, thanks to Steve Barkley.

Steve: 26:33 Well you guys did a lot with this. I just triggered some of your thinking. I wanted to ask about one – especially international schools raised this issue about changing changing staff. And I'm wondering what your approach is to new people coming onto the team. And there's sometimes, historically, I've run into situations where the team has been founded and is clicking and working well and then some people leave and new people come and the people who stayed the people who've been there have a commitment to how we're doing it and the people who are coming in are

looking for some voice and choice in being a member of the team. So I'm wondering how you've addressed some of that.

Angela: 27:32 So it's probably a great place to come, but it's also a very confusing place to come because we've developed language, you know, our Friday flex time and our blocks of time. And so there's a lot of explaining to do. So with our teachers that come brand new, we've said, just show up and one of us who've been there will be in your classroom with your students right now if we're going on two to three weeks. Someone will be there every step of the way. We've only had one person come at a time. So that's helped a lot. But it was really interesting because just today, our
newest team member who's only been at school for a week asked us, well why do you do it that way?

Angela: 28:24 How come you don't do it this way? And it got us all to kind of stop and ponder for a moment and say, well this is why we started
it. This is how it evolved. But we're not quite sure why we still do it that way. We're not sure if that's the best way and we're not sure if this other option is even something we can do. But it got us to stop and think, because sometimes you're right. You get into a groove and you just kind of do the same thing as normal, but you need an outsider's perspective. And I think again, that's why this team was created. This team was purposefully selected to be a team, kind of always looking forward, always looking to the next. And so are the new people who are brought onto this team. They're always purposely put on our team as forward thinkers and people who are open minded to this.

Steve: 29:18 So the people who are hired know, they're hired to be on a team. That's actually not an option.

Angela: 29:26 It's not an option. Now, every iteration of what those teams look like or what community teams look like is different.

Steve: 29:36 It’s actually a conversation I’ve had with administrators at the hiring level. If you’re looking to build a school that’s made up of
teams, then that really needs to be clear in the hiring practice. We don’t have the position of a seventh grade math teacher. The position we have is somebody who’s got the specialty to be able to handle seventh grade math as part of the seventh grade cross-curricular team as part of the department. And that’s a set of expectations that you know is gonna be here.

Angela: 30:18 Yeah. When the World Economic Forum puts out their list of 10 skills, teaming and collaboration keeps moving up towards the top. It’s because that is the skill. It is not something that you’re born with. You have to be taught how to be a team player. You have to be taught how to work collaboratively and open minded and all of these words that we use. And I don’t think teachers are taught that in teachers’ college. Teachers are taught how to manage behaviors and how to write an IEP. We’re not taught how to be a team player.

Nina: 30:55 And I think just jumping on that idea, that’s another reason why we also try and teach this to our students. It’s okay, you may be working with students in the green room, in the blue room, in the red room today. But for the following day, you might be working with students in the orange room. And it’s this idea of, okay, well trust who you’re going to be with. Listen to them and all of the different skill that you need to be able to work as a team. So it’s not just the teachers who do this. We are slowly teaching the students. And by the end of the year, they walk out of grade three feeling so comfortable with the entire community because they’ve just had so much exposure to working with different students at different times across different subject areas. And from what we take from the feedback that we’ve heard from our students, they love it.

Steve: 31:46 I’ve been in schools where, when they started

teams, after a while, the kids actually got it. The kids got watching the teacher and the kids made the connection. That's our cooperative group. Those three teachers are doing the same thing. And it was so cool to have it come from the kids because in effect, in a lot of schools, kids have never seen their teacher cooperate or collaborate with anybody.

Angela: 32:16 Yeah.

Steve: 32:17 While in the midst of teaching them to do it.

Angela: 32:20 Yeah. Last year we had an office right by the stairwell and it was a small little room and we decided to call it the soup room. And we get together so much to talk about kids, let's just get together and get to know each other while we're at school. So we all didn't get a yard duty on Wednesday afternoon and we made soup and we would sit there and we'd gab about life. And when the kids would come up to sneak upstairs to go get their water bottle or something they forgot, they'd look – what are you doing? You're having soup together? The school ended up online, but by the start of the second semester, you heard students getting together and having lunch together. Bigger groups of kids going, well, it's kind of like their soup lunch We're gonna get together and have lunch and gab. And it's just a different way. And yes, it's modeling all the time and hopefully we're modeling for our colleagues as well that it can be different. You just have to let things go a little bit.

Steve: 33:23 There's one other reason that W wanna put out into the conversation that I believed – I've always thought teaming was great and it was the way to go. But I believe more and more today, it's required. And if I were to connect it back to your comments about where teaming is coming up and up and up in the world as a necessary skill, I connect it to complexity. The greater the complexity of the task that you're looking to accomplish, the more likely it's gonna require a team. And if anything, as the person who's been in this

business for for 50 years now, the complexity of what teachers are being asked to to accomplish has gotten to the point where there's no choice. It has to be tackled as a team.

Angela: 34:21 Yeah. Hundred percent.

Steve: 34:22 Closing thoughts? Any message you'd like to leave folks with?

Nina: 34:31 I think for those who are trying to get a little bit deeper into their life of teaming, I think the number one thing is trust. You really have to create that sense of trust and be vulnerable with those who you're working with. Because without that, I really don't think you can do it in an effective way that will help the students and the teachers who are with on a daily basis. So trust for me is up there with the most important. But the other thing is the idea of you need to let go of the, "my classroom, my students, my space." Because once you're a community, it's not like that. It's our students, our space, the student's space. I think if there were two things that I'd have to say as final thoughts, trust, and let go. It's ours. It's everyone's in this together.

Angela: 35:34 That's it. There's just two things. Those are the two things.

Steve: 35:38 Well, I really appreciate the time and the and the openness you both shared here. I just wanted to check if you'd be comfortable, I'll put your your email addresses into the lead-in to the podcast so if folks have questions, they can direct them directly to you.

Angela: 36:00 Yes. Most certainly.

Steve: 36:02 Thank you.

Nina: 36:02 Absolutely.

Nina: 36:03 Thank you so much for this opportunity. It's been absolutely fantastic.

Steve: 36:07 Thanks.

Steve [Outro]: 36:08 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean and please remember to
rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.