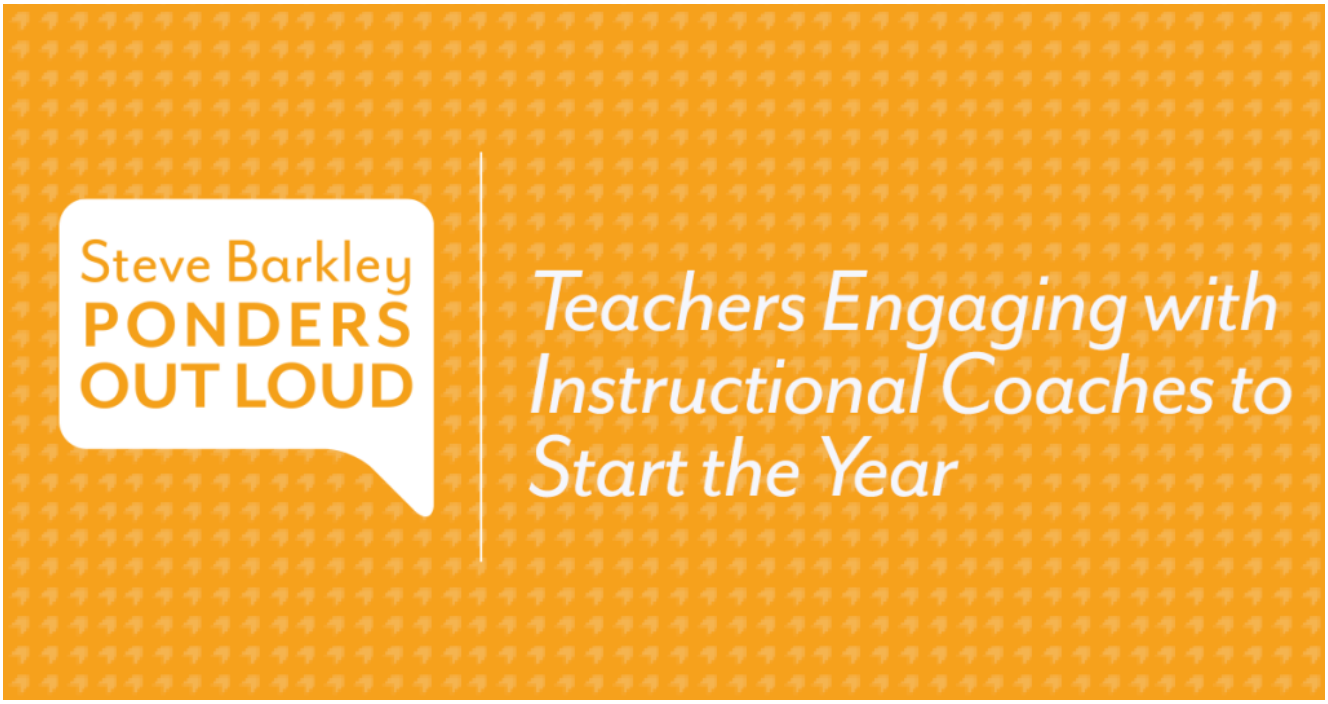
Podcast: Teachers Engaging with Instructional Coaches to Start the Year



In many schools, it isn't common to find teachers exploring possibilities and reflecting on observations with instructional coaches early in the school year. Perhaps there is a view that coaching is problem-solving and the idea that coaching around designing is being missed. Hear an example of what that coaching around a teacher's early planning might sound like.

Find Dan Steele's post here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As

instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.960] – Steve
Teachers engaging with instructional coaches to start the year. Across many schools, I've noticed that instructional coaches are rarely found in teachers' classrooms during the first few weeks of school. When a coach's availability is mentioned before school begins, one might hear responses like these: "I'm just trying to get my class started. Let's get a few weeks under our belts first." "I don't even know what I need yet." I've struggled across the years to share a different view. The first days of school are when teachers are establishing the learning environment, relationships, routines, expectations, and learning behaviors that will shape the rest of the year. Those first days aren't just the beginning of instruction. They're the beginning of a culture of learning. It's the perfect time for a teacher to dialogue with a coach about the learning environment she hopes students will experience, the learning behaviors she hopes they will develop, and the decisions she's making to bring that vision to life. Then, the coach observes students' responses and reactions to the teacher's decisions. A follow-up feedback session allows the teacher to confirm or further explore her read of student responses and decide next steps. During those first weeks, teachers are so engaged in leading the class that they often can't fully see how students are responding.

[00:02:16.580] – Steve
A coach can focus on the students. Who's engaging? Who's hesitant? Who's taking risk? Who's already beginning to demonstrate the learning behaviors the teacher hopes to develop? That experience gives teachers another lens for

reflecting on the impact of those instructional decisions on students. Dan Steele, with Growth Coaching International, recently shared a post titled, “Instructional Coaching: The Unhelpful Conversation I Keep Having.” Steele describes a version of a conversation he says he has heard often. He shares that it usually starts with honesty that he appreciates: “Look, I think instructional coaching is probably good. I’m just not sure it’s right for us now. We’ve got a lot already going on.” Those comments immediately reminded me of these early-year coaching conversations. Steele has identified a pattern that’s telling us something important. Here’s his words: “The people saying this weren’t skeptical about coaching itself. Being curious, after pressing and following up more, they would tell me about a conversation with a coach, mentor, or leader that changed how they taught, or a colleague who watched them and asked one question that unlocked something. They believed in this, but they seemed to doubt the packaging.”

[00:03:59.090] – Steve
The problem is many educators still see instructional coaching as a program. And when framed that way, hesitation isn’t resistance. It’s a rational response. If coaching is viewed as problem solving, then of course teachers wait until they have a problem. You might hear, “I don’t have a problem yet. I’m sure I will at some point, and then I’ll look for my coach.” But if coaching is viewed as supporting intentional decision-making, then the first weeks of school become one of the most valuable times to be coached. I’d like to ponder in this podcast how school leaders and coaches might introduce coaching activities that are not only valuable to teachers and students, but also help define coaching as a collaborative, reflective, constant practice within the school culture rather than a program. You’ll find the link to Dan Steele’s post in this podcast lead-in. Let’s explore what teachers want to have happen in those first days. And the roles that supporting coaches could play. Instead of asking what problems coaches

can help teachers solve, let’s ask, what are teachers working to accomplish during those first days of school? And how can a coach support teachers to create those outcomes?

[00:05:40.070] – Steve
The beginning of the school year isn’t when teachers need the least coaching. It’s when they’re making the greatest number of relational and instructional decisions in a very short period of time. There are so many goals a teacher may have in mind as the new school year begins: classroom culture, relationships, routines, expectations, needed student learning production behaviors. A coach’s contribution to any of these, with possible co-construction of a plan and observation for reflection, can be much greater than coaching for troubleshooting. Imagine over coffee on a preschool start staff day, a teacher shared this comment with you: “One of the most important things I want during the first days is for students to begin trusting me and one another. I want them to feel this is a classroom where their ideas matter.” How might such a comment lead to a co-construction reflection between teacher and coach, and perhaps even an opportunity to observe during the first days of school?

[00:07:06.350] – Teacher
You know, one of the biggest things I’m thinking about isn’t even curriculum right now. I really want these kids to begin trusting me and each other. I want them to feel this classroom is where their ideas matter.

[00:07:19.780] – Steve
Tell me a little bit more about that. What does a classroom look like when students believe their ideas matter?

[00:07:27.050] – Teacher
They’re willing to participate. They don’t spend all their energy worrying about whether they’re right. They’ll disagree respectfully. They’ll take a chance.

[00:07:38.400] – Steve
Sounds like increasing students' willingness to take learning risk is central to what you're hoping to accomplish.

[00:07:45.850] – Teacher
Yeah, that's important.

[00:07:48.120] – Steve
Since you'll meet 5 different groups of 6th graders every day, what impact do you see that having?

[00:07:56.050] – Teacher
Every group will have its own personality.

[00:07:59.500] – Steve
So you'll actually be learning about each class while they're learning about you.

[00:08:04.930] – Teacher
That's true. I hadn't thought about it that way.

[00:08:08.370] – Steve
As you're planning those first few days, what experiences do you hope every class has that might help build that trust?

[00:08:17.150] – Teacher
Well, I want students talking to one another from the first day. I want them to hear me learning their names. I want them to know that I'm interested in who they are and not just whether they can answer the content question.

[00:08:30.340] – Steve
What feels most important to you?

[00:08:33.390] – Teacher
Probably that students are feeling comfortable enough to speak up.

[00:08:37.800] – Steve
If that begins happening, what might students actually be

doing?

[00:08:42.670] – Teacher
More students are volunteering. Students are turning toward one another during discussions instead of just looking at me and maybe asking questions instead of waiting for me to call on them.

[00:08:53.940] – Steve
Those are all things that we could actually observe together.

[00:08:57.810] – Teacher
Hm. You know, I'm going to be so busy leading those activities that I probably won't even really know how much those things are happening and with which students.

[00:09:07.800] – Steve
That's exactly where I might be useful.

[00:09:11.250] – Teacher
How so?

[00:09:12.530] – Steve
Well, I could watch the students. I could collect observations around the things you've just described: which students volunteered, who seemed hesitant, were there moments when students began responding to one another instead of directing everything through you?

[00:09:29.310] – Teacher
Well, that would be actually really helpful.

[00:09:32.930] – Steve
Which class would you like me to visit?

[00:09:35.560] – Teacher
Maybe my second period class on Wednesday. It's my largest group.

[00:09:39.670] – Steve

Great. As you're thinking about that class, what would be the most valuable thing for me to be paying attention to?

[00:09:47.860] – Teacher
Well, I'm curious the students begin talking with classmates that they don't already know, and I have a lot of kids coming in from different elementary schools.

[00:09:57.450] – Steve
Perfect.

[00:09:58.110] – Steve
I'll watch for that, and I'll note moments when students seem especially willing or reluctant to contribute. We can compare what you experienced while facilitating with what I noticed students doing.

[00:10:15.170] – Steve
I think this conversation communicates the coach's respect for what I label as the teacher's agenda. The teacher has identified a goal that's important to her and agreed on the desired data for the coach to record. A test question that I always have for myself when the pre-conference is finished is this: If the teacher observes me writing while I'm observing, does she know what I'm recording? If so, trust is built when the post-conference conversation reinforces our pre-conference agreement.

[00:11:01.190] – Steve
The post-conference with the teacher that we just spoke with might begin like this: Let me go back to our conversation before the class. You described the kind of classroom you wanted students to begin experiencing. What evidence did you notice today that suggested things are moving in the direction you want?

[00:11:26.720] – Teacher
Well, I was encouraged by the partner conversations. Almost everyone was talking. There weren't many students sitting

silently and looking around.

[00:11:35.630] – Steve
You were able to identify students engaging with one another.

[00:11:40.200] – Teacher
Yes, and I noticed more hands going up during the second discussion than the first.

[00:11:45.430] – Steve
What do you make of that?

[00:11:46.570] – Teacher
Mm-hmm. Maybe they were getting a little more comfortable, or maybe they were realizing I wasn’t looking for just one right answer.

[00:11:54.830] – Steve
You’re thinking your responses help students feel safer about participating.

[00:12:00.930] – Teacher
I think so. I tried hard to acknowledge their thinking instead of evaluating every response.

[00:12:07.350] – Steve
I heard that loud and clear. Tell me more about that decision.

[00:12:13.410] – Teacher
Well, I wanted the students talking with one another instead of just trying to figure out what was the answer I wanted.

[00:12:20.550] – Steve
One thing I noticed was that during your first partner discussion, several students looked hesitant before they began talking. By the third partner discussion, almost every student turned immediately toward a partner when you gave the prompt. I also noticed students referring back to what their classmates had said rather than only responding to you.

[00:12:46.990] – Teacher
I didn’t see that. I was so focused on facilitating the discussion, and that actually tells me that the routines may already be starting to take hold.

[00:12:57.310] – Steve
That’s what I wondered too. What do you think contributed to that shift over the course of the period?

[00:13:04.530] – Teacher
I think giving students enough wait time before asking for responses helped, and intentionally thanking students for building on each other’s ideas.

[00:13:14.480] – Steve
So things are headed in the direction you want. What do you think you want to be intentional about continuing?

[00:13:23.210] – Teacher
Well, I’ll definitely keep using partner discussions, and I also think I’ll ask students even more to respond to a classmate before responding to me.

[00:13:32.980] – Steve
I appreciate you inviting me to explore something that was so important to you. I’d enjoy continuing to identify how students’ willingness to trust, participate, and take risks develops over the next few weeks. I believe such a coaching experience sets the stage for coaching to be viewed more as supporting intentional decision-making rather than simply troubleshooting. Too often, instructional coaches aren’t invited into classrooms during those first weeks because teachers don’t yet feel they have a problem worth coaching about. But coaching isn’t most valuable because teachers have problems. Coaching is most valuable because teachers are making decisions. During those opening days, teachers are making dozens of relational, social-emotional, and instructional decisions every day that will influence

classroom culture, student relationships, learning routines, and student learning production behaviors that get carried out throughout the year. When coaches can become thinking partners during those decisions, coaching is no longer viewed as troubleshooting. It becomes part of how great teaching is intentionally designed. Perhaps that best illustrates why everyone deserves a coach, not just when something isn't working, but when something important is being created. I'd love to hear your thoughts and experiences with early-in-the-year coaching. You can always reach me at barkleypd.com. Hope your school year gets off to a great start.

[00:15:28.350] – Steve
Thanks for listening.

[00:15:32.840] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.