Podcast for Teachers: Situating Responsibility With Students – Enhancing Learning

Barbara Smith, the editor of **Urgent Care for Schools: Situating Responsibility as an Engaging Way for Students to Transform School Cultures**, explores providing meaningful, memorable, and fulfilling learning experiences by situating responsibilities with learners.

From her experiences in public, independent, charter, and international schools, Barbara explores expanding the student identity to include that of becoming service providers, injustice responders, action researchers, designers, apprentices and teachers.

Visit the ZPD website and connect with Barbara here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – 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.

[00:00:29.560] – Steve

Situation Situating Responsibility with Students: Enhancing Learning. Our guest today is Barbara Smith, the author of, "Urgent Care for Schools: Situating Responsibility in an Engaging Way for Students to Transform School Culture." Barbara has worked as a teacher and school leader in public, independent charter and international schools, as well as in three graduate and undergraduate schools of education. Today, Barbara spends her time writing about innovative ways to support engaging school cultures. Welcome, Barbara.

[00:01:12.130] – Barbara

Thank you, Steve. It's wonderful to be part of your podcast today.

[00:01:16.620] – Steve

Well, we're excited to have you here. So I'm wondering if we can pull that word, "situating responsibility" out as a starting point. What do you mean by situating responsibility?

[00:01:28.420] – Barbara

I'm really glad you asked, because years ago, I read a lot about situated cognition and situated learning and I really wanted to look at what was engaging for students when they were learning and certainly when they were thinking. I looked

at this idea that if the students were involved in something that had purpose, I call that a purpose-based curriculum, then it was much more engaging and there was no need for classroom management strategies and all sorts of things that we have to do now with the way the system is set up with testing being the goal. But when you have a curriculum that situates responsibility, and more specifically, the teachers and the students that situate responsibility, what they're doing is they're coordinating projects and activities that matter to them, that are helping others. That's very key. It's no longer learning as an individual activity. Learning itself is much more collaborative and much more of a collective when they can situate responsibility. What they're doing is they're moving from a novice level of understanding through apprenticing with more expert people in a certain area about something that they're doing to support others, and/or we hope that they're talking like and becoming like experts.

[00:02:59.410] – Barbara

It's something that's much more than just go out and take the chalk off a chalkboard or wipe down the whiteboard. It's got to be much more of experience that does involve others. That's, I think, really important. They need to be able to move others to action. Situating responsibility is a tall order in a sense, but it is something that I think it can make classrooms and schools much more engaging for the students and the teachers in them.

[00:03:36.800] – Steve

Are you okay with the term that learning is a social act?

[00:03:40.350] – Barbara

Yes, it is. No question. My team would agree with that 100%, learning is independent of other people.

[00:03:50.850] – Steve

Yeah, I carry the same thing then to teaching.

[00:03:54.670] – Barbara

Yes.

[00:03:55.850] – Steve

Social between the teacher and the student, but social between teachers as well as with students. What are some responsibilities that you envision students taking, and how does that then impact engagement?

[00:04:12.270] – Barbara

Well, when I started out writing this book, I originally had not taken the time to publish my own research on peer teaching. So this was an opportunity to say, I knew from years ago, from the research I collected, that students who were responsible for teaching other students, and when they talked about this experience, they would light up. Those memories would always be there. I look at situating responsibility also as a memory-making activity. These are the kinds of memories that came out because I put in I'll call out to lots of folks that I knew professionally to share things that they had done that were really exciting, where students were empowered and how I felt, would that be a memory-making experience for them? They came back I had, eventually, there were 23 guest authors in the book, and so some of them wrote together. You might have a student writing a chapter on their own or a student working with their teacher facilitator who was supporting them, or we may have had articles written by the facilitators themselves reflecting on what those experiences were that they created. They wound up being, I looked at it from a qualitative research perspective, and it fell into six categories, the stories.

[00:05:31.410] – Barbara

Each section has maybe four or five different examples of them. But one would be students as service providers. There were stories about students who were doing school service, community service, or global service. They broke down into different experiences that they had, and they spoke about how powerful and what an impact they had. There were students who did social justice. We call them social justice seekers, and they designed campaigns to support change in the community. One of the teachers said, this is the last water bottle you'll ever see in the school, and they hung it at the front door. That was a message to say, this is the last one you're going to see because they're not part of…The policy changed to remove them, for example. There were those kinds of social justice stories. There were social justice stories that were created when a student created their own website and a campaign for students to young students who were 18 to be able to vote. This was a story from a really exciting young person in Florida who wound up eventually going to Harvard because he had shown such initiative and created this website that really took off.

[00:06:49.040] – Barbara

And certainly, his podcast and everything that went with it was very exciting. There are students that become action researchers. So one of the stories is told by a facilitator teacher who had students really look at what could be better scheduling going on in the school, as opposed to that being done only by one or two people in a school or by a computer. But this was something about how can learning be better for us if we were able to change how time is used? Those students certainly felt empowered because they were listened to with their suggestions, and they had action research as a systematic process to back it up. They didn't just go in with what they thought about. They actually did some work to back up their work. There's six of them all together. Let's see,

there’s social designers. Students created podcast, students created website, as I mentioned, some of them did art exhibitions, some of them created their own newspapers. There was also students who were entrepreneurs. That was another theme that came up. One student tells a story about creating a restaurant and how the ins and outs of that process in the school.

[00:08:06.490] – Barbara

Then I really ended off with the stories of peer teaching. One was about a young teacher who had been a camp counselor and how that experience of helping others, not just their safety, but really helping their full well-being in an outdoor camping situation was something that led her to decide to be an educator in her professional life. And then finally, there was all sorts of research on the value of peer teaching. So that was all part of what came out of the look at all the examples of people saying, here’s our memory-making experiences. And they pretty much fell into those six categories.

[00:08:50.350] – Steve

Very cool. I’m wondering what mindsets need to exist for a teacher to support moving in the area of greater student responsibility?

[00:09:06.620] – Barbara

I think a teacher certainly needs the growth mindset. I mean that in a very broad way, but they need to be able to understand that the authenticity of what is being learned has to matter. They have to be critical friends to themselves. I’ll say that in a way to say they have to ask themselves some tough questions about their teaching and about the learning that’s happening in their classroom. One of those questions is, will what I’m teaching really stick with the students throughout their lives? That’s a big question. The other one is, is it really engaging for all my students? The last

question I think is really powerful is, are all my students learning in a deep way? If they have the courage to ask those questions, then they'll be motivated to move beyond a textbook table of contents as their curriculum. Because I think the more that that is used as a cookbook and some one way of teaching and learning, now I call that a fixed mindset, the more you're going to require all sorts of classroom management controls to force the kids into compliance. And that is not not engaging. And so they have to be willing to look inside because a lot of the direction that many young teachers today are receiving are, well, hey, we've got a head office, we've got a Department of Ed or Ministry of Education, and they're going to do all this grunt work for us, and they'll just hand us the lesson plans and we'll be fine.

[00:10:51.150] – Barbara

Well, they're not fine because teachers are leaving the profession. They're not feeling a sense of fulfillment. So if they can't have that sense of autonomy, it's very difficult for them to be able to model that for their own students. I think if they had that, they would value these more, I would say, more informed practices for teaching and learning. That would be something they would value more. They need to have that growth mindset, that openness, that there is no one way to do school. Anyone who tries to tell you that the science of reading, this one way to do something is the only way to replicate it and make it scalable to all schools in the neighborhood or even across the country, are only fooling themselves, and they've really done a shortcut around the hard work of what is involved in understanding teaching and learning.

[00:11:52.700] – Steve

There's a phrase I've used for years that as a teacher, you need to trust the brains of kids.

[00:12:00.260] – Barbara

Oh, lovely.

[00:12:01.380] – Steve

What I mean by that is there's things kids will learn that we didn't teach. Versus I have to teach it for them to get it. If I trust their brain and I create the opportunities, the learning will occur.

[00:12:22.600] – Barbara

Oh, I agree. There's so much arrogance about, especially COVID taught us that. When we had to go online and we had to realized that kids were building tunnels under whatever being presented to them in the days where they had to sit in front of a screen. But that's what a mentor of mine, David Booth, said to me once. He said, "they're building tunnels under your classrooms because they're finding other ways to learn." Because that way that you're putting out there that is really from an industrial model of teaching and learning that thought was gone – it isn't working. But students do have a human desire to learn. They will find their way around us if they have to.

[00:13:05.730] – Steve

We talked about mindset. I'm wondering if there's a skill area that you think the teachers need to move in this direction.

[00:13:17.320] – Barbara

Yes. I think that they need to experience what they're asking their students to experience. If they want to be service providers, then they need to be service providers in their own lives. And what does that mean? Do they do a Terry Fox run in September every year? That might be something they do personally. Do they canvas for the Heart and Stroke Foundation? What kinds of things do they do outside of it? Teachers technically are hired at the beginning of their

careers because of the volunteering that they've done in the past and so on. So that's sometimes gets left behind because of the drudgery of the expectations of what is put on at teachers' plate. I think they do need to be the things that they want the students to be. Students need to be something other than a student, and a teacher needs to be something other than a teacher. They really need to be action researchers so they can actually provide qualitative evidence for a quality school. They do need to have skills of researching and so on, and not just relying on people outside the walls of the classroom or outside the school to tell them what's important for their students.

[00:14:41.130] – Barbara

They need to be empowered to understand what is in the best interest of their students. They do need nowadays to be able to make websites. They need to be able to have these skills. If they're a physics teacher, they should know how to be a robotics teacher because that's the real practical application of physics. They need to have the same experiences that are responsible, and that includes leadership experiences. You have students in schools that are leading all sorts of activities, but sometimes you have a very hierarchy or a leadership model in a school where there's a principal and then there's an assistant principal who's putting out fires. They can actually have responsibilities. Maybe one of your vice principals is responsible for service learning, and therefore has to model it and so on. Maybe you have five other vice principals that not only teach for half of the day, but the other half of the day, they might be certainly engaged in action, research or social justice issues in their community and so on. I think they have to have more skills than just standing at the front of the room and doing teacher-directed work.

[00:15:57.590] – Steve

I'm hearing being a learner.

[00:16:00.480] – Barbara

Yes.

[00:16:01.070] – Steve

Each teacher needs to know how to learn him or herself. I have worked with a school where every teacher had posted in their classroom what they were currently learning.

[00:16:13.670] – Barbara

Oh, nice.

[00:16:14.990] – Steve

And part of their class discussion was, what am I doing to learn it? Where am I being frustrated? Where am I running into failure? But in effect, being able to describe for students, the same kinds of things that students would be experiencing as a learner.

[00:16:35.610] – Barbara

Awesome. Yeah. Well, that whole idea that learning is not a straight path. It's full of curves. I love the idea of kids going home and the parents eventually asking them, "Well, what did your teacher learn today? How are they in their learning path and their journey?" I think that that is incredible content for school as opposed to memorizing just facts. I think that would be a shift if we could hear those questions asked on the dining room table.

[00:17:11.520] – Steve

So you brought up parents, and I'm wondering what concerns might parents be raising with teachers as teachers would move into increasing student responsibility. And how do you see teachers being able to address that with parents?

[00:17:29.820] – Steve

Well, I think modeling has much to do with making change

happen for sure. I think I understand that parents can look at what is in the curriculum and say that's not rigorous enough or that's too rigorous. They can have a lot of opinions, but they don't necessarily have much play with learning. I didn't start it myself – this was something that a school in Virginia had set up called… It was like parent projects, family projects. Instead of having science fairs, and one of the chapters in the books I contacted one of the moms and said, would you like to write this? And she said, I'd love to write it with my daughter. So they wrote it together about a project they did for one of these project nights. And their project was on their family. They had to create a family tree. And we wanted them to be as creative as possible because this was a Da Vinci-inspired school. So the parents who opted to bring their kids, sometimes an hour away to the school, were very excited about becoming co-learners. Like the science fair where parents said, oh, I didn't do anything. We said, you both are doing these projects together.

[00:18:53.830] – Barbara

They talk about their experience in a way that shows, I think that they have really, I think, crossed a barrier and understood that learning is more about what happens when you find things out as opposed to the finding out of things. They did their project on ancestry, and they created these – sometimes they brought in real trees, and the place was full of really exciting things. Another group did planets. They created their own planet with their own social justice system and their own rivers and so on. They had to be able to justify what they did. Over the first hour, the parents would go around and they would look at all the projects and ask questions and ask them – most of the questions were, how did you come up with these ideas? Which is really a great entrepreneurial question to be able to ask. Then the students would go around and see them. But they co-planned, co-presented, co-learned it. This was probably a wonderful example for many parents who don't necessarily trust the

system to teach everyone because there was no grades, there was nothing involved like that. But it was incredible. The participation was 100% coming back at night to be able to do these project fairs.

[00:20:24.760] – Barbara

They actually created a 51st state, but it was not Canada. [laughter]

[00:20:30.138] – Steve

[laughter] Very cool.

[00:20:30.300] – Barbara

And that was fun, what they created. Some of them divided other states. It was a very creative experience, but all the parents got to be excited about creativity. So they needed to live it to understand it. And that's what I think is really the starting point. You need laboratory schools. You need to encourage schools that are doing these things. Charter schools started out supposedly to be able to be innovative in many, many ways. And they've turned into – too many of them, for example, as how can we scale those results? How can we replicate that? They're looking for textbooks as their curriculum. That's not what the intent was. If charters are not going to be those innovative spaces, then perhaps universities need to create these lab schools so parents can come and view them in a fish tank situation where you're watching the excitement and the deep level of learning, deep level of questioning the kinds of skills that are not just going to get kids into college, but going to certainly have them move on from an undergraduate degree to probably graduate degrees, but are in the workforce doing things that are innovative.

[00:21:47.470] – Barbara

And that's really what the world needs, because the answer to

our climate situation now is not on page 65 of a textbook. We need to create young thinkers who are going to be able to solve tomorrow's problems.

[00:22:01.350] – Steve

I've been in this a lot of years, and my finding is if a kid is excited about learning, and engaged in learning, there aren't many parents of that kid who come to school to raise a concern with what the teacher is choosing to do.

[00:22:24.250] – Barbara

Exactly.

[00:22:24.380] – Steve

Parents want the same excited engaged kid. Any kid that's getting out of bed and can't wait to get to school today to do something, I think you got a pretty happy parent.

[00:22:40.950] – Barbara

Yeah. And happiness is underrated. I mean, that is a real key metric that you don't really see on a dashboard of numbers that counts the the bums and in seeds or certainly counts the scores and rates them all. But happiness is is clearly important, not just why should they be unhappy for all their school life? I mean, that's a lot of years and a lot of time. And so you wonder why you have a lot of mental health issues in society after what we do often in schools.

[00:23:19.300] – Steve

So I'm wondering before we close out if you got thoughts on a starting point. So I'm a teacher in a pretty strong, traditional school, maybe a school that's not even doing a whole lot of staff to staff things. I got a classroom on my own, and I'm feeling the urge from listening to you that I'd like to take a step or two. You got a thought of what's a good starting spot?

[00:23:47.070] – Barbara

Well, first of all, I think certainly volunteering to support any service learning action in a school is always welcomed. It's not just that student leadership or character ed teacher or guidance counselor that should be responsible for that. There's incredible opportunities there to look at your own curriculum through a service lens. I think you need to support internships, not just field trips, but actually internships where if you're in a high school situation, students are actually spending a whole term in a work environment. I think that's really powerful. It shouldn't just be a nice option. I think in this day and age, it should be mandatory. We had students going into a veterans hospital in Detroit. Every Wednesday afternoon, once a month, they were bused to the hospital, and they were buddied up with a senior, and they learned a lot about the Vietnam War, but they wrote the students' biographies, and that writing of the biographies became a major assignment in English. It's like, how can you see service and internships taking you beyond what… If you look at your curriculum through those lens, I think it helps. I think you need to read about entrepreneurial education because that is where kids are so engaged.

[00:25:21.510] – Barbara

I used to walk in a classroom at the International School of Brussels, and Mike Crowley was a teacher of journalism at the time. I tell you, last time, I didn't know where he was because the students were so focused. It just felt like a press room. It felt like they got this deadline, they're on this, it was just the buzz. Learning more about entrepreneurial education. That was part of it. They became journalists. Half the time, he didn't even need to be in the room because they were there. Just incredible examples of there are people that pay attention to the buzz and try to find out more about what is it about the buzz. Chances are the students are feeling a sense of purpose and responsibility. I

also suggest reading about habits of mind. If you look at the habits of mind or if you learn about Teaching for Understanding from Project Zero at Harvard, this helps you, again, look through a new lens at what is being presented to you. It helps you chunk out your curriculum in such a that you can accomplish the meeting expectations that are at the government level if you put them together with projects.

[00:26:42.470] – Barbara

I think that there's ways to be able to verify that they understand those particular expectations within projects at different steps. It's not like you have to wait till the end and then you assume these things have happened. There's ways to do projects that can make a difference. The last I'll mention is, oh, also go to conferences or go to webinars that are put on by people that talk about deep learning and habits of mind, Project Zero. And the last thing I'll mention is becoming curriculum designers. Any opportunity you have to be able to shape a curriculum, then you're in a good space. If you cannot and you don't see hope for that, then maybe some way down the road, you might want to start your own school.

[00:27:30.610] – Steve

That's great. I love your excitement and enthusiasm. I know that many of the listeners are going to catch it, too. How can people follow up with you, find out more about your book? What's the way that they can stay in touch?

[00:27:46.620] – Barbara

Well, the book came out in January this year, so it's through Brill, is my publisher. Our publisher, I should say, because there's quite a few of us that contributed to the book. If you are interested in connecting with me, then I do have a website that is at ZPD, is where you can connect to my website. There's all sorts of free resources and materials, not not to adopt, but adapt or at least be inspired by, I hope, because

everything that I've been involved in in the last 40 years or so on wound up on my desktop of my computer, and I said, well, if this is something that I don't see as common place out there in education, then maybe I better put it either in a website or in a book. That's what's kept me busy for the last little while. You can find me, and I've also written several books for Rowan and Littlefield as well. But the books about situating responsibility right now are with brill publishers.

[00:28:54.600] – Steve

How do folks find the publisher?

[00:28:57.630] – Barbara

You just put brill.com in Google, and you can find it, and then you can find my name, and it'll come up.

[00:29:07.000] – Steve

We'll find it, and I'll post it in the lead-in to this podcast.

[00:29:11.320] – Barbara

Sure. Oh, thank you.

[00:29:12.970] – Steve

Thank you so much.

[00:29:14.240] – Barbara

Thank you.

[00:29:15.330] – Steve

Have a great day.

[00:29:16.460] – Barbara

You, too.

[00:29:18.980] – 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.