

VICKY BULLOCK (VB)

I am Vicky Bullock. I am the K through five math coach at John Burroughs Elementary School. And this year has been like building the plane while flying it.

JENNA FOURNEL (JF)

It seems like in that situation, you probably have really practiced your your improvisation techniques. And I remember this summer you talking about going into that position and wondering what it was going to be like. Remind me and then our listeners.

You are, you are not new to the teaching profession, but you are new to this particular role. How many years of teaching experience did you have before you stepped into to this kind of coaching position?

VB

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JF

What's something that you're especially proud of that's happened this year?

VB

I'm really proud of the way that our math team has come together and just kind of pushed through things that have been thrown at us. So it's kind of that, "yes, and..." mentality and that is a stance that we try to take, you know, they laid these things out. It's like, ok, how do we do that and then stay true to ourselves in the process?

JF

And what you just mentioned there about the team made me realize schools do all kinds of different things when it comes to different focus and discipline. So, you're in an elementary school? Do students have different teachers for their literacy teachers and their math teachers during the day?

VB

Yes. We're departmentalized K through 5. So there's basically a whole team that's teaching kind of each grade level. So we have K through five E L A teachers and K through five math teachers. So the E L A teachers meet with their coach, math teachers meet with me, and we figure it out.

JF

Well, that bringing “Yes and...” approach,, that, it seems like that's, it's almost like you don't have another option when you're in a situation like yours. But what was it like for you working with teachers more than working with students?

VB

Yeah, that part is very different. But it's, you know, you learn people and, you know, I knew all of these people but as teachers and I was a teacher in a classroom now I know them as a teacher in a classroom and I also know them as the math coach.

So I know how to approach each person, you know, and I've really tried to, I really tried to get really fine tuned what everyone is really good at so I can play to their strengths so that things don't feel quite so,, intimidating, I guess for them. And starting with, starting from that place that probably gives you some building blocks for thinking about where, where you can take them.

JF

You already mentioned a little bit about “Yes, and...” but last summer, we talked about these rules of improv saying yes and, respecting what others create, knowing your goal playing, big, embracing mistakes.

What are some ways in which you found yourself applying those rules, using those rules, both for yourself as a, as a coach, but maybe also in kind of trying to teach some of those things to your colleagues.

VB

Well, OK, then know your goal, right? Math has been kind of redesigned in DC public schools and math is now the thing. E L A has been the thing for years and now math is finally getting proper attention. So that was already set out as our goal to master the new math block and the components of the new math block.

So really, I've tried to stay focused on those things and as a team, we've tried to work through all of those pieces of our math block together.

So that it's not me telling you what to do. It's us creating how this can work in our own space. And that seems to have worked out because we really kind of have this whole math block down. Now we can focus on components that are gonna just take a little bit more time.

So that's next year's work. And that's fine.

JF

Well, and I, I love that in what you described right there. And this is sort of part of when we talk about "know your goal." it's know your goal, but be flexible in how you get there.

Like recognizing that there isn't just one path and it sounds like that combined with the knowledge you've built up and the relationships you've built up with the folks on your team, you were able to sort of apply that flexibility and still arrive where, where you want to.

VB

Yes, I've tried to, I mean, it's kind of crazy otherwise.

JF

What does the, what does a typical day look like in this role?

VB

Well, I stay in classrooms. I stay in classrooms and I'm mostly just on the floor working with kids because that's what I like.

JF

And in doing that, I would imagine that's also really helpful to your colleagues because it shows that you're willing to do the work that you're asking them to do.

VB

And I'm also trying to like, gently model some things like questioning, not saying so much saying less is what I call it, and listening to kids more. Instead of saying that to people because it doesn't really always make sense but that if you just stop talking they'll talk.

JF

And I would imagine, especially in math, that can be really important to be able to understand what they're thinking, particularly when they're struggling.

VB

Yeah. And then, like, there's another piece of that that hasn't really come together this year.

That, that's where we're going next year is the idea of monitoring that writing things down, carrying a clipboard, like, attached to the hip and writing down things. That's, that's kind of hard here.

Most people just say, why do I need to write things down?

JF

So that's a form, of data I would imagine or a form of like using observational data as a way to, to assess and understand what students are learning?

VB

So we'll work on that next year. I mean, really, that's, that's my only, that's my only really big thing to work on next year because it's going to take a lot of time to build that up.

First, you just have to get used to carrying a clipboard. Yeah, then we have to get used to putting the pen to the clipboard and recording something about the kid that you just sat next to. So one step at a time, you know.

JF

What ideas do you have about how you make the case for it?

VB

I'm still working on that part. Like, really, I'm trying to, I don't want to make the case the way DC public schools tells you to make the case because it's very top down and it's not fine.

And so then you get defenses up when you, when you have that kind of approach. So that's my goal this summer is to work on how to flesh that out with teachers.

JF

What have you personally seen as the value of collecting those observational notes?

VB

For me, it helps me get a better picture of the kiddos where they are, what they can do, what they're struggling with. What's just not making sense to them. You know, that helps me figure out, OK. Is there a different way I can make this case. How else can I teach this to you? Who else can I get to help you with this?

But if I don't write it down in the course of the day it's gone because there's so much happening. And looking at children from September to October, they look totally different and then they look different from October to the middle of October. They look completely different and tracking it on paper is like, oh, you can really see it.

JF

Where did you find joy this year?

VB

This year I found joy in working with different ages of Children because I've never had that experience to be able to see things from K to five and then see how things from K to five fit together like why we're doing this in K and how that informs what we know in five.

So that's really been very helpful just for me, for math content and the progression of standards and things like that.

But also working with my colleagues and being able to find resources for them. If they need resources, if they're asking for this, what can I find just being there to help them out because they don't get to get out of their classrooms once they're in, they're in.

So, you know, I'm here to do all that other stuff and then really being able to celebrate people's success and just tell them every single day. "I'm so glad you're here."

You know, look at what you have done with so and so. Look at these children, look at the work that you have done which, which, you know, you didn't think was gonna come together and it's coming together beautifully. Look at it.

They, they are, they are rising first graders now. They are rising fourth graders now. Look at them. So it's, it's fun to be like their cheerleader.

JF

There's something so important about what you're describing in terms of also being able to be specific in your feedback and, and also because it sounds like you spend so much time in the classroom, you're actually able to observe that growth with the students yourself.

VB

Yeah. And then something that I do when, when I get ready to leave their classrooms, I leave them a note and I found it interesting. I was surprised that everyone has kept all the notes. Like I see them in places like I'm just in there and I just happen to like I spy, I see the

notes and they have them like stacked up and I'm like, oh, that means something like I did not know that I really didn't know that people value that, but people have notes from like September.

I'm like, ok. Wow. Deep.

JF

Well, I imagine that that kind of just knowing that you've got someone there who's got your back, who notices what you're doing. I mean, I would imagine I'd want to keep those too because it's, it on those days when you're really struggling, it's good documentation to know you're not alone.

I remember from years and years ago, first meeting you at the institute that I feel like you might have been one of the first teachers who spoke so enthusiastically about the fun of math. It was early in my time at Inspired Teaching too.

And I remember thinking like, oh, if I could learn from someone who was this excited about the content, it would also have changed my experience with it.

And I wonder if having that departmental approach helps teachers or help, help students to be learning from people who are really excited about what they're teaching.

VB

No, if you're excited about it, it will flow over which is why I try to go in classrooms and really just applaud the work that Children are doing and the thinking and the explaining and all of that.

And you know, everybody knows, I always say he or she who does the work, does the learning like it says on that background because I say that every single day, we all know that I got that from my colleague at Lasalle and that's something that we say every single day all the time and the kids know it and they believe it.

So that makes me happy.

JF

Can you think of an example of a time this year when you saw when you were like present for an aha moment?

VB

Oh yeah.

I have a bulletin board outside my tiny house a long huge bulletin board. I hate bulletin boards. The only thing as a teacher I do not like and I have to keep that board up every month.

So I started making it an interactive board instead of putting data on it.

The board has like an open middle problem and I have the numbers up there, the problem, the directions and kids just come by and start working on it and then I'll talk to them about it and they'll explain their thinking.

Then I'll take it off.

I'll take a picture of it and put it up and I'll take it off and somebody else will come by and have a different solution and it's been, that's been, I like that part, you know, and the kids love it. I wasn't expecting that.

It took a while for them to actually get used to.

"Oh, we, we can do that!" Like, yeah, it's for you. So now adults and children are doing it. So trying to make that change and make math, like, visible all over the building.

JF

You have been part of Inspired Teaching in different ways for a long time. And I'm just curious to know your thoughts on what you'd say to someone who's deciding whether or not they want to participate.

VB

I would say just do it. Best time you're gonna have, I don't care what else you do in the summer – it's gonna be the best time you ever have and you're not gonna expect it to be a good time and it's gonna blow your mind.

What you come away with is gonna blow your mind, the freedom that you have to think and interact with people and just, just enjoy yourself.