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The Power of Our Words

BY PATRICIA GALLANT

Peter Johnston's book *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004) is among the most meaningful and transforming professional books I've ever read. His compelling examples of classroom teachers' subtle language choices showed me that, by choosing our words with intention, we can greatly influence a child's view of himself, his attitude towards learning, and ultimately his approach to life. Johnston taught me a new meaning for the word *agency*—a child's sense of self and his own abilities. He elaborates, "Children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals" (p. 29)—my new mantra.

Although Johnston's definition of *agency* was new to me, the idea that adults influence children's self-perceptions by how we speak with them was not. Like most teachers, I strived to build emotionally healthy children and develop learning communities. I knew that daily relationships within my classroom mattered. But Johnston added another layer to my thinking. He helped me see my former ideas about using language to build self-esteem and motivate students in a new light.

For example, when children use developmental spelling, the response "I see you know how to spell the beginning of that word" confirms what has been successful, while also affirming the learner's competence so he will have the confidence to once again approach the process. Marie Clay (1993) refers to this as attending to the "partially correct." The power of affirming their approximations cannot be overstated.

We can build agency, also, with responses that attribute an accomplishment entirely to the student(s), such as "I like the way you figured that out," or "How did you do that?" or "You managed to figure that out with each other's help. How did you do that?" Through our word choices, we can prompt students to articulate what they know, thereby constructing deeper meaning and affirming that problems can be solved by strategic thinking and action.

Sometimes, however, silence is a powerful way to promote agency. Extending thinking time can result in more student talk, more sustained talk, and higher order thinking. When a teacher waits for a child to figure something out or self-correct, it conveys the message that she expects the child to be able to accomplish it. Moving quickly to another student for a response or providing the answer conveys the opposite message.

Because I was so struck by the power of *Choice Words*, I rushed to get a copy of *Opening Minds*:

Using Language to Change Lives (2012). As in *Choice Words*, Johnston focuses on the idea that the subtle differences in the things we choose to say to children impact their learning—most particularly through their sense of agency. In this book, I was drawn to Johnston's idea of a fixed-performance theory of intelligence and knowledge versus his dynamic-learning theory. It reminded me of my mentor Marge Lipson's words in presentations to teachers: "Smart is not something you are; it is something you get" and that it is each teacher's job to help children "get smart."

As in his first book, Johnston reiterates that children develop theories about who they are. But he expounds in *Opening Minds* that people of all ages have either a fixed mindset or a dynamic mindset (or a combination of those), and the view we adopt for ourselves profoundly affects our approach to life. People with fixed mindsets believe that their qualities are more or less carved in stone—that they have a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, or certain ability. These are the people who say "I'm just not good at math" or "He has a natural talent for soccer" or when things go wrong, "I'm just stupid, I guess." They don't cope with mistakes very well because they see errors as a reflection of their intelligence or character. We all know adults and children who think this way. They may blame others when things go wrong or may not realize their own potential. (I behave this way when I say, "I am just not good at golf" and avoid it, instead of "I can't play golf well yet" and take lessons.)

Consequences of a fixed view are significant. Johnston emphasizes that, if our students see their abilities as fixed, we can't help them, and they can't take up agency in their own lives. He notes that he is not talking only about children who struggle in school. Students who realize that they learn easily but feel they have no control over their own competence may, in fact, work to make their abilities appear fixed, to

preserve the appearance of being competent. They do not want to show errors or missteps. So to protect themselves, they stay within their comfort zones and avoid new challenges.

Dynamic mindset people, however, see themselves as learners. Their worldview is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate and change through your own efforts. They think like this: “If I’m not that good at math, I can put forth some more effort and improve.” “If I my mistake cost my team the victory, then there are certain skills I need to work on.” “Just because I have a natural talent for piano, doesn’t mean that I can’t improve and work on my skills.”

There are many ways to apply this thinking in teaching. Consider the place of factual knowledge in our curricula. Yes, students do need to know essential facts, but Johnston points out that the trouble with factual knowledge is that it is dead knowledge. It doesn’t change. There is little to discuss. It is uncertainty that drives inquiry and agency. Uncertainty creates good places for conversation or for children to find that, if they pursue something, they have the power to construct the knowledge. We need to create productive ways of engaging uncertainty about important things in our classrooms

We can highlight that things change by focusing on process and how things are done, more than on immediate products. Our language can empower students to be self-directed or it can make them believe that their job is to follow your directions. Consider a writing workshop authors craft mini-lesson. After you have completed a read aloud or shared writing to demonstrate the ways authors use details, you might say, “Now, try it. Get out whatever you are writing, and add four more details.” OR “Can this

help you with the writing you are working on now? If it can, then see if you can improve your piece with more details. If it’s not going to help the piece you are writing today, keep the idea of adding details in mind for when you can use it.” While both of these conclusions let student know that they will eventually try out the new strategy, one explicitly directs, and one asks them to decide (Wood-Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).

What do you want your students to be able to do? If we want them to be self-directed and develop agency, they need to be responsible for making decisions for authentic reasons. Thanks to Peter Johnston, I pay closer attention to the things I say to children (and adults, too) and I choose some words and phrases I use to promote agency.

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