

Little Words Mean a Lot

Categories: Classroom Community

How could a slight shift in our teaching stance impact the culture we are creating?

Have you noticed how our culture has a fixation on four-letter words? Mostly they are words that we shouldn't utter in polite company. They are often words reserved for our frustration, disgust or anger. They have been considered so powerful that they are banned from the airwaves and forbidden for children. However, I have come to believe that the really powerful words in our society are the three-letter words. These words sit atop three letters, like a stool sits on three legs. They are balanced and simple. And yet they are really the words that make the world go round. For example, "can" is a word every child should be taught at an early age. "You *can* do this. Yes, you *can*." This little word is one of the most empowering words we *can* find. It gives permission to try, to fail, to try yet again. Kids are often corrected when they ask, "Can I [do, go, etc.]" They are corrected by telling them that they "may" go outside or play or eat a cookie. May gives permission, but can makes it happen. Maybe they should simply be answered by asking, "Can you?" We want our children to understand the possibilities the world offers. In this case, it is OK to put their dreams in a *can*.

The best thing I have heard recently was an educational researcher who suggested that the best word for educators and parents to use is "yet." When the child says, "I'm not good at (fill in the blank) the adult should simply add "yet." "I'm not good at math...*yet*." I can't learn this...*yet*." "Yet" implies ultimate success. It allows the momentary blockages and frustrations to be put into a context. And most of all, it doesn't give an out not to try. Education is a lifelong process. We are all working on something that hasn't happened yet. The goal is always before us and it is always attainable. It just hasn't happened *yet*. "Can" and "yet": when paired are two incredibly powerful educational tools. They set out the road ahead and provide the energy for the trip.

A third word that educators probably don't use enough is "yes." It seems to me that an awful lot of what happens in school revolves around telling kids what they don't know and what they can't do. The entire high-stakes testing movement was built on the idea that we had to find out what kids didn't know. Zero-tolerance policies and student handbooks are focused on what they can't do. Yet progress only gets made when someone says "yes." If someone asks another person to marry them, the appropriate response is not, "let's see how that fits our rubrics." They are just looking for a simple "yes." All of us, adult or child, need to see "yes" in most things. Obviously, there are times when a "no" is the appropriate answer, but I would challenge all of us to find a way to say yes more and no less. "Yes" creates the motivation to move forward towards showing the child that they can do something, even if it can't happen yet.

Another indispensable three-letter word for the education of all of us is "why." Every great discovery started with that little word. Why does the sun seem to come up in the morning and go down in the afternoon? Why is the sky blue sometimes, but grey other times? Where does the moon go during the day? Why are my eyes blue, but yours are brown? When I was superintendent in a very fine school district we decided to focus our supervision of teachers on their questioning techniques. We wanted to make sure they distributed their questioning to a broad segment of the class, that they employed adequate wait time between their questions and supplying an answer, and that more of the questions led to higher-order thinking. As we got into it we found that despite the fact we were a district full of really gifted teachers, most teachers only involved about 20 percent of the class in questions, used very short wait-times, and

used mostly lower-level questioning. But the really stunning thing we found was how they fielded questions from students. When a student asked a really provocative and deep question-like “why?”-they were immediately squashed by the teacher. The major goal of our district was to produce thinking, creative graduates, and we were doing that by killing divergent thinking whenever it raised its head! To our teachers’ credit, when we pointed this out to them they began to change their style of questioning and fielding questions. They learned to say “yes” a lot more. And they learned the power of “why.” A key three-letter word for any of us living in the modern world is “now.” By this, I mean focusing on the now and losing a lot of our preoccupation with what has already happened or what might or might not happen in the future. Of course, we have to learn from history and plan for the future, but both those things are done *now*. Now is really all we have. Learning to be present in our world and then passing that on to our students is a gift. I believe a lot of the behavioral issues that are presented in schools are because we have lost that sense of now. When that happens we have high anxiety. Kids are wild and teachers are wilder. When that starts to happen, the best antidote is to take a deep breath, and look around, and appreciate where we are and what is happening right now. We have to learn and to teach how to be present in the present.

While there are many more three-letter words that bear exploration like “one,” “fun,” “fix,” or “act,” the one that I would like to leave with you is “joy.” I was in an educational meeting once with a group of very bright, very accomplished educators who were discussing what elements of school reform we should make sure we include. I suggested that maybe having more joy in the classroom was a good place to start. The meeting came to a screeching halt. Finally someone said, “Hmm. Learning, joy, what an interesting idea.” Most of us became educators not for the money or the prestige it offers (I have found very little of either). Rather, we became educators because of our passion for helping children. And ultimately the end product needs to be allowing them to find their own joy in their own passions. Maybe our educational anthem should be “Ode to Joy.” If there is some joy in the classroom, the kids will learn because they will be motivated. Just a thought.