

Engaging the Disengaged, Number Nine: Teacher Talk Part Two, How We Talk Matters

Categories: Professional Learning

One day Gale came running into my class after P.E. panting, "Mrs. D., you need to give Jimmy one of those Mrs. D.-type lectures."; Upon asking him exactly what a Mrs. D-type lecture looked like, he said, "You know" that lecture you're always giving" where you tell us we are too fine an individual to behave in such a manner." I smiled to myself, asked Gale what Jimmy had done this time, and launched into my Mrs. D.-type lecture.

I learned this valuable skill from my friend and colleague Linda Owsley, many years before reading Peter Johnston's texts on the great importance of the words we use with students. Many times, I watched Linda look deeply into an offending student's eyes and ask, "Does that behavior honor the fine young man/woman you are?"

How we talk to students matters greatly; our words have the power to pull children into our lessons or encourage them to tune us out. Peter Johnston, author of *Choice Words* and *Opening Minds*, believes that the way we talk to students can change their lives by sending the message that they are capable and worthy, or that they are worthless and not capable.

I believe that every encounter with a student, whether we are correcting or encouraging behavior or simply teaching a lesson, needs to send a message that our students are wonderful humans who can and will succeed in all matters. When disciplining a child, adolescent, or teen, we must be very careful to reprimand the decision the child made or the situation she is in, and not the person. Poor behavior can be a tremendous opportunity for learning; however, if a student is demoralized by the situation, he will simply feel bad and lose self-esteem, rather than learning from the event. Therefore, it is crucial that no judgment be made about the offending person, but rather the process of his decision.

Our tone of voice in our lessons can pull students in or leave them out. A kind, caring voice goes a long way toward involving students in the lessons we have worked so hard to plan and teach.

It is also crucial that we encourage students to talk with one another in a respectful and caring manner. At the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, this is one of our most important missions. As Tim Shriver has said, "The heart and the mind are connected." After each and every lesson, we spend time asking students to reflect on how they did with their partner, asking questions such as, "What did you do to be a responsible partner today? How did you show respect for your partner? How did that help you learn?" Students get many chances to practice caring and responsible talk during collaborative read-alouds and discussions.

Much research has been done on the effect of students feeling that they are part of a community of learners who are valued by both their teacher and their peers. This not only helps students enjoy school and learning, it increases test scores.

Such effective influences on learning, long recognized by teachers, are now also being increasingly corroborated by a body of research. Accumulating research makes the compelling case that social and

emotional factors are integral to academic learning and positive educational outcomes for children. SEL has been found to improve academic attitudes (motivation and commitment), behaviors (attendance, study habits, cooperative learning), and performance (grades, test scores, and subject mastery) (Zins et al., 2004).

“SEL and Academics,” CASEL, 2015

So the next time a student behaves in an offending manner, try a Mrs. D.-type lecture. If it works as well for you as it did for me for 32 years, thank my dear friend Linda Owsley and all those other old sages who knew that how we talk to students matters.

For continued learning, we recommend Peter Johnston’s Opening Minds podcast discussion about the fixed or dynamic language we use with students that helps to define who they are.

This blog is from a larger series titled Engaging the Disengaged. Many students in our country are disengaged from the literacy instruction they receive in school. There are numerous reasons for this phenomenon. Most are validated by extensive research while a few others are simply issues I have witnessed in my 35 years of teaching elementary and middle school literacy: poverty, second language issues, competition with the video world, literacy level below that of peers, overemphasis on phonics/skills, not enough emphasis on phonics/skills, literacy viewed as boring, lack of access to books, lack of choice in reading topics, inability to comprehend, time spent in the ‘low’ reading group, little comprehension instruction, overemphasis on testing, lack of fluency, low vocabulary, and summer literacy loss. Disengagement is just one reason charter schools have and continue to be set up in our country. Hopefully our charter schools are places where students with any of these issues might find the engagement they need in order to invest in literacy instruction. To read others in the series [click here](#).