

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## VALUES AND CLARITY BUILD CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

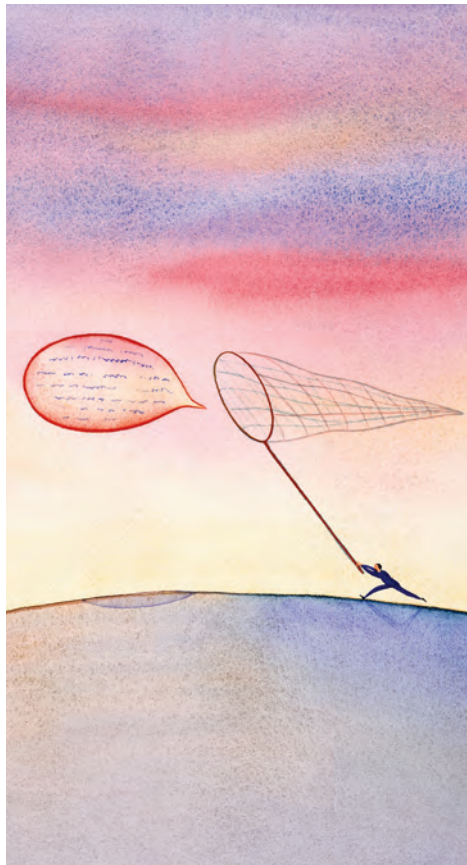
“What we teach kids is not just subjects,  
but how to live.”  
— Robert Quinn (in *Sparks*, 2001)

By Valerie von Frank

A teacher steps to the side of her unruly class. She raises her hand and waits for attention while many of the children continue talking to each other. Another continues to the pencil sharpener, and several make their way to their cubbies to deposit work.

“Could you please quiet down and take your seats?” the teacher asks quietly but firmly. A few students respond, but many don’t, and the teacher’s frustration with her class stirs again. She feels a lecture rising in her throat.

According to Paula Denton, director of program development and delivery at



the Northeast Foundation for Children, this teacher’s language did not convey what she meant. The teacher was trying to respectfully tell the children it was time to be quiet, Denton suggests, but she really did not mean the children had the choice. The children, on the other hand, heard a question and interpreted the teacher’s lan-

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guage as giving them an option.

“We need to be thinking constantly about language and notice its effects,” Denton said. “If we’re not conscious of our language, we can’t be effective in our teaching.” Stating expectations as a command and not a question is not disrespectful, she said.

The language teachers use in the classroom is essential to creating a climate of safety, Denton said. And when students feel safe, they have more positive feelings about school and achieve more academically (Rimm-Kaufmann, 2006).

**Five rules**

Denton makes five points for communicating effectively:

**1. Be direct and authentic.**

Model polite, respectful language, but state your intention clearly. If you want students to sit down and it’s time to be quiet, say that. In *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn* (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007), Denton told about a time when

her class increasingly failed to pay attention to her. “I like the way Henry and Lucien are sitting on the rug,” she relayed that she told her class. The rest of the class, she said, was very happy that Henry and Lucien were being praised, but they felt

they had other important things to do at that moment. By not being direct in letting the children know it was time to sit on the rug, Denton said she was attempting to manipulate them, rather than building trust by being direct about her expectations. A warm, matter-of-fact tone is best, she said.

She said sarcasm is a poor classroom tool, although many even elementary-level teachers use it. “It’s biting and it’s mean, although most of the time, the teacher is intending to add a light touch,” she said. “But the teacher is in a power position. Even if the children laugh, it hurts and you’re betraying their trust.”

**2. Show faith in others’ abilities and intentions.**

Language conveys underlying assumptions and expectations, according to Denton. For example, “Show me how you will follow the rules in the hall” conveys that the teacher believes the students know the rules and will follow them. Observing the positives, such as, “You’re trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence,” demonstrates confidence in the students’ abilities and gives them evidence for themselves of a value in action. Assume positive intentions, she said.

**3. Use action-oriented language.**

“Children are concrete thinkers and need to know the specifics,” Denton noted. Adults can generalize and think in the abstract, but children need the specifics of what it means when one says, “Be respectful.” For example, one 2nd-grade teacher taught her students a “listening pose,” so that when she wanted their attention, they folded their hands on their desks, leaned forward, and focused their eyes on her. When she connected “listening” for them to these three specific actions, she was better able to get their attention.

**4. Keep it brief.**

“We tend to talk too much,” Denton said. “Remember what the point is and stick to it.” A long series of sentences in an explanation allows the mind to wander, she said. Young children, especially, find it difficult to follow multiple directions given all at once.

**5. Know when to be silent.**

“This is tied to cognition and learning theory,” Denton noted. Allowing listeners time to process aids learning. When teachers wait three to five seconds for students to respond to a question, students’ responses show higher-level thinking (Swift & Gooding, 1983). Teachers also learn to listen better by pausing, she said.

**Uncovering values**

Positive communications help affect students’ sense of identity, according to Denton, as well as how well they work and their relationship with the teacher. Denton said teachers benefit

RELATED ARTICLES

**NSDC TOOLS**

- Identifying beliefs about learning, p. 4.
- Clarifying beliefs about learning, p. 5.

**RESEARCH BRIEF**

Using clear language is one recommendation from researchers for reducing problem behavior in the classroom, p. 10.

**NSDC’S BELIEF**

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

from spending time examining their values, the language they use with students, and how they are conveying their intentions and their beliefs to children.

“Often teachers are sharing values they’re not even aware they hold,” she said. “Their language, for example, does not show faith in students’ abilities. When we are unaware of our values, we won’t examine and change them.”

For example, many educators have made the phrase, “We believe all children can learn” almost routine. “If people don’t realize that’s a radical statement, there’s a disconnect,” said Denton.

While many make that public statement, the disconnect is “the way teachers talk to kids and about kids in teacher workrooms,” she said. “It’s the choice of curriculum, about preparing for tests, about taking away recess because we need more time to drill kids.”

One school’s mission statement, for example, says “staff is committed to all students’ pride and self-worth,” yet at a community meeting, a staff member questioned the wisdom of allowing students outside the attendance area to enroll in the school because it would “change the look” of the school.

“We have to tie values and what we really think to how we are acting,” Denton continued. “Platitudes and slogans are not enough. Oftentimes we think because we’re saying it — ‘We believe all children can learn’ — that it’s true, but our behavior doesn’t match that, and then the saying has nothing to do with reality.”

Denton said leaders can work with teachers in a supportive, nonjudgmental atmosphere to begin to examine assumptions and beliefs, and then connect those to behavior.

“Let teachers talk and say what they really think without putting out judgments, but hold them to high standards,” she said. “Beliefs and values are hard things to work with because change has to happen slowly. It’s what we assume — and what we wish or think we’re operating under isn’t always what’s being communicated.”

But when teachers become more conscious of their underlying beliefs, they can home in on how those beliefs are expressed and affect stu-

### ASK YOURSELF

Focus on your practice and its congruence with your core values and beliefs by asking yourself:

- What do I value?
- What beliefs about learning underpin a particular practice? Are these beliefs based on current research about how we learn?
- How does our current practice help us achieve what we value?
- How will a suggested new or different practice improve our ability to achieve what we value and believe?

**Source:** *From values and beliefs about learning to principles and practice*, by Julia Atkins. Seminar Series No. 54, Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria, Jolimont, Victoria, Australia, 1996.

dents’ behavior and achievement in the classroom.

“If we’re really conscious of what our values are, our language will follow,” Denton said. “If we find that the values we think we hold are not what we practice, then we work at it through practical strategies — here’s how to talk to convey those beliefs, let’s look at our behavior and what it reflects. And sometimes beliefs change if behavior changes first.”

### References

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