

Matching Language to Beliefs about Student Learning

“Through language we send messages in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. I could simply tell students that I’m honored to be there teacher, that I think they’re capable and smart, and that I trust them to make wise decisions, but unless I’m specific in my praise and my actions support my words, they may not hold much meaning.”

-Debbie Miller, Teaching with Intention

Decide what you believe is important to convey to students about their place in the class community and the learning process, and then ensure the words you use in your daily language match those beliefs. Your students will feel valued and successful in their classroom community when their teachers words validate their contributions, promote mistakes as part of learning, and demonstrate belief in their growth. Here are some concepts represented in Choice Words, by Peter Johnston, for you to consider when defining these beliefs. Reflect on whether your language (the words you use when speaking to children on a daily basis) reflect these messages.

Beliefs	Do you believe this? (rate your belief on a scale of 1-5, 5 being highest)	Does the language you currently use reflect these beliefs? (rate your belief on a scale of 1-5, 5 being highest)
You are respected here as a thinking, feeling person even when you do not succeed at something. And respecting others is valued.		
We are here to learn and to accomplish things. Learning is satisfying for its own sake, but using it to accomplish something, like making the world (or some part of it) a more just and caring place is even more satisfying.		
Learning involves making mistakes. Mistakes are normal if you are learning. Mistakes say nothing about who you are. They are for fixing and learning from.		
Failing to solve a problem or achieve a goal does not mean you are a failure. It means you haven’t succeeded at this task yet and need to try another strategy or apply yourself differently.		
Uncertainty is to be expected. It offers possibility.		
The more we help each other learn, the more learned the class becomes and the better we all		

learn. It is in our best interests (and we have a responsibility) to help each other learn.		
Working on challenging problems with others is bonding and requires thinking out loud together. Learning how to think together improves thinking alone.		
Other people who have different ideas and experiences can help us have new thoughts. You have something to contribute to our thinking (because you have a unique perspective).		
Different perspectives don't mean that one is wrong. They offer more options and help us think in new ways. You can disagree with someone in ways that lead both of you to better ideas.		
<p>Success does not mean you are a success (or smart) it is best explained by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard work and persistence. (To solve problems you have to try hard and not give up.) • Acting strategically. (To solve problems you have to try strategies.) <p>When we are successful (or not), it is more helpful to think about how we went about it and what we learned from it than to think about what it shows about who we are.</p>		
We are constantly growing and changing. People can change themselves and their interactions, and play a role in their own development.		

Reflect on the following with a coach or colleague:

<p>1. Does your language more accurately reflect the statements that you feel you believe the most?</p>	
<p>2. Write in your own words three of the concepts that you strongly believe and the words you use with your students to reflect those beliefs.</p> <p><i>Example: I believe that success is based on hard work and persistence. I make a point to tell my students what actions they took to lead to success and stress the actions over their abilities.</i></p>	
<p>3. Look at the concepts you believed a little less (less than 3 on the scale) and think about why you feel that way. Are you projecting your own experiences/belief system on your students? Is that beneficial?</p>	
<p>4. Write the three concepts you felt you believed a little less and plan out words that you could begin to use in your daily language to students that would reflect those beliefs.</p> <p><i>Example: I somewhat believe that people can change themselves and their interactions. I can start to use words that convey to my students that it is their responsibility to think about what they could have done differently, and apply that thinking next time they are in a particular situation. I should model this for them.</i></p>	

Now what? Here's some strategies for changing Teacher Language:

- Record yourself in the classroom for short periods each day. Play back the recording to hear your words and tone.
- Ask a colleague to sit in your room for fifteen minutes and write down words and phrases you use often.
- Set a reasonable goal. Focus on one aspect of language to change at a time. Give yourself enough time to make the shift.
- When you say a word or phrase you'd rather not say, practice in the moment by replacing the words with something more constructive.
- Take a breath and think before you speak.
- Get a colleague, your grade level team, or the whole staff to focus on changing the same word or phrase.
- Put replacement words on a card you carry with you or high up on classroom walls as a reminder to yourself.
- Use signals instead of words to get attention. Give yourself space to think more clearly about the appropriate use of words.
- Try to use open-ended questions as a way to interact with students.

Denton, P. The Power of Our Words. Northeast Foundation for Children: Turner Falls, MA. 2007. (pg 172)

Now look out for the following signs that you are improving:

____ 1. You decide to make a change.

As you begin to see how language affects students, you start to notice aspects of your language that you would like to continue and others that you would like to change. Whether it is incorporating more constructive phrases, giving more specific feedback, or changing your tone or pacing, you are aware of how your language makes a difference and you are ready to focus on it and make some changes.

____ 2. You catch yourself when you use counterproductive language.

In this stage, you catch yourself when using words or phrases you are trying to change and silently practice more constructive language that may be used in the future. Soon, you are able to stop yourself and include the intended constructive message. You also begin to see how students respond to the specific and positive language you are using and how this change is benefiting your interactions with students.

____ 3. You begin to think in new language patterns.

As you begin to think in the language you have been developing, using descriptive, positive, and constructive feedback has become much more natural for you. Your "new language" feels almost effortless and demonstrates your positive approach to teaching.

Denton, P. The Power of Our Words. Northeast Foundation for Children: Turner Falls, MA. 2007. (pg 170-171))