

Five Essential Practices

Listening is the ability to hear, understand, and interpret messages and communications that others are sending. As educators, we know how important listening is. Yet many of us—teachers, coaches, and administrators—feel more prepared to talk than to listen, and wonder what, really, we should be aiming to do when we listen.

There is, of course, no single answer to what it means to listen well as an educator, but by listening to other educators who have thought deeply about this question, we can increase our understanding and listening skills. We looked at work from different educators and educational activists and distilled our learning into five essential practices to increase our listening skills. Below, we explore the five practices and discuss how teachers and coaches can put them into action.

- Hear the person speaking.
- Stay humble and seek full understanding.
- Listen equitably for all voices.
- Respond thoughtfully.
- Recognize listening as a responsibility and a form of care.

Hear the person speaking.

“However the message comes to us, the role of the educator during the first part of any communicative act is to simply hear. Not to judge, not to solve, not prescribe, but first to hear. Sometimes it helps here to ask gently clarifying questions to confirm what you have heard or to paraphrase in order to communicate that your partner has been heard.”

Cornelius Minor. *We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be*, Heinemann, 2019

Teachers can...

- make time for supportive one-on-one conversations with children. Make sure children are aware that you are available to listen to them.
- focus on understanding the content of children’s words before jumping to the implications of their words.
- use some, but not too many, gentle, child-friendly questions to clarify children’s words.
- paraphrase what you heard children say in child-friendly language, and check their understanding with a simple question such as “Is that what you were telling me/us?”

Coaches can...

- start coaching conversations by listening more than speaking.
- resist the urge to provide a helpful solution in the middle of a conversation about a teaching issue or problem, and focus more on understanding the issue or problem.
- avoid asking critical clarifying questions; instead ask honest, gentle ones.
- paraphrase what you think teachers have said, and check for understanding with an informal, friendly, non-judgmental question such as “So what I heard is...”

Stay humble and seek full understanding.

Key Quotes:

“No one is an expert on someone else’s life. Research can lead educators to questions they may ask their students or their students’ parents. It can lead them to deeper observations in different kinds of situations. But nothing can replace listening to what people have to say about themselves. I have learned that I must learn to listen even when I am the object of someone’s anger. I must listen without editorializing and ask questions in order to find common space.”

Lisa Delpit. *“Multiplication Is for White People”* (p. 198). The New Press. Kindle Edition.

“They will forgive your clumsy or rambling sentences if they sense your intention to listen expansively and offer questions from a place of humility. “

Elena Aguilar. *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators* (p. 103). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

Teachers can...

- recognize that children have important things to say, which you and other adults may not be aware of or have not fully considered.
- recognize that parents and caregivers have important things to say, which you and other school staff may not have fully considered.
- ask questions about children’s and family’s points of view with genuine humility, and the desire to learn more than instruct.
- hear what children and families are actually saying to them, not merely what your research and assumptions led you to believe they would be saying.

Coaches can...

- recognize that teachers have knowledge, insights, and valuable practices, which you may not be aware of or may not have fully understood and considered.
- ask questions about teachers’ points of view with genuine humility, and the desire to learn more than instruct.
- hear what teachers are actually saying to you about the work of literacy teaching now, not merely what your research and assumptions led you to believe teachers would be saying.

Listen equitably for all voices

“Embracing multiculturalism compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?... To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom.”

bell hooks. *Teaching To Transgress (Harvest in Translation)* (p. 40). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Teachers can...

- become more aware of which children are and are not speaking in class, and seek ways to ensure all voices are fully heard, possibly through more small group work, partner work, better facilitated whole-group discussions, or generous and generative forms of questioning.
- ask yourselves why in your classroom and your school some voices are not heard, or not heard as often as others, and then really think about the implications of your inquiry.

Coaches can...

- become more aware of which teachers are and are not speaking in one on one conferences and in team meetings, and then seek ways to ensure that all voices are heard more often. You may need to talk less yourself, use more generative and generous forms of questioning, use discussion protocols, turn and talks, or break out groups.
- ask yourselves why in your meetings some teachers' voices are not heard, or not heard as often as others, and then really think about the implications of your inquiry.

Respond thoughtfully.

"After we hear, we've got a bit of thinking to do. After receiving any message, we've got to name what we think we heard and plan a response. In teaching, responses are not just what we say: they are what we do and the habits and rituals we establish."

Cornelius Minor. *We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be*, Heinemann, 2019

Teachers can...

- pause for a minute before responding to children to make sure they are responding as thoughtfully and kindly as they need to.
- consider what they have heard from children and families and then think about ways they can better adjust their instruction, routines, and practices to best meet the needs of individual children or groups of children.
- recognize that a good response is not necessarily a fast one or even a verbal one. A response might be a gesture of acknowledgement like a nod or a smile at just the right moment to show a child that you have listened to them, or even a book read aloud a week later, which was intentionally selected to connect to something a child or group of children were saying or expressing the week before.

Coaches can...

- pause for a minute before responding to teachers to make sure they are responding as thoughtfully and kindly as they need to.
- consider what they have heard from teachers and then think about ways they can better adjust their work to best meet the needs of individual teachers or groups of teachers.
- know that you don't have to respond right away to what a teacher has shared. You can just listen, maybe consult with a colleague if you are not sure how to respond, and follow up later with an email and a resource to support the teacher.

Recognize listening as a responsibility and a form of care.

"I see it as a fundamental responsibility of the teacher to show by example the ability to listen to others seriously."

bell hooks. *Teaching To Transgress* (p.150). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

"To listen attentively and to respond as positively as possible are the very hallmarks of caring as I have described it."

Noddings, Nel. *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 2nd Edition (Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought Series) (p. xiv). Teachers College Press. Kindle Edition.

Teachers can..

- be responsive to children’s comments by affirming, paraphrasing, linking, and extending what children say to them and each other.
- highlight when they and others are making an effort to listen well.
- express curiosity about children’s ideas by asking genuine questions about their thinking, and letting the rest of the class know that you are curious to learn more.
- name what exactly they are doing to listen well, before and after doing it: “I am going to really look at Alice while she talks, so she knows she has my full attention and I am listening...I understood what Alice was saying because I really looked at her while she talked and noticed her expression.”
- draw attention to and name for children what you have learned in a conversation from listening to other children speak, so that they follow suite: “I just heard Leo say he thought they might find a route out of the quarry, do any of the rest of you think this might be possible too?”
- design lessons with opportunities for children to talk more and to listen more, so that children can learn to express their ideas and also see the teacher modelling strong listening skills, which they themselves can learn from.
- make sure their in-person and virtual body language demonstrates open, non-judgmental thinking by keeping their expression warm, arms relaxed, and their eye contact respectful.
- Give children your full attention when listening. Don’t allow adults or other children to interrupt precious one-on-one interactions.

Coaches can...

- be responsive to a teacher’s comments by affirming, paraphrasing, linking, and extending what they say to them and to each other.
- express genuine curiosity about a teacher’s ideas by asking genuine questions about their thinking, and letting others know they are curious to learn more.
- design meetings with opportunities for teachers to talk more and themselves to listen more, in order to learn as much as possible from teachers and to model the willingness to listen to others’ ideas, which makes the teacher/coach relationship so valuable.
- try to listen actively for the “intent of a teacher’s comments” without jumping to assumptions about your interpretations of their words.
- if no one responds immediately to a question you ask, wait for a while before answering it yourself or rushing onto another question, giving others a chance to take their time and respond thoughtfully, and allowing for pauses in the conversation.
- make sure their in-person and virtual body language demonstrates open, non-judgmental thinking by keeping their expression warm, arms relaxed, and their eye contact respectful.

Works Cited and Further Reading

- Aguilar, Elena. Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators (p. 103). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
- Delpit, Lisa. "Multiplication Is for White People" (p. 198). The New Press. Kindle Edition.
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