

Choice Words

When teachers emphasize and recognize effort and persistence, students develop identities as empowered learners.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

Each of us has a story that we tell about ourselves. Such personal narratives are “crucial to our knowing who we are; they provide a sense of identity” (Block, 2008, p. 35). Students’ interactions with teachers, administrators, and other adults contribute to their development of identity and sense of self and help them develop their personal narratives, which significantly affect the choices that they make throughout their lives. As Riessman (1993) said, “Individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives” (p. 2).

As instructional leaders, part of your responsibility is to ensure that the adults in your school help students develop their autobiographical narratives in positive and productive ways. Part of that narrative relates to the mind-set that students have. Dweck (2006) believes that learners have either a fixed or growth mind-set. A fixed mind-set is a belief that “your qualities are carved in stone” (p. 6) and thus require a person to continually prove his or her worthiness or give up altogether. A growth mind-set, on the other hand “is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (p. 7).

Importantly, students develop a

growth mind-set on the basis of the interactions they have with adults. When they are praised for being “smart,” they are likely to give up on tasks that challenge them because they have come to believe that learning should be easy. When the teacher recognizes effort and persistence, students focus longer on difficult tasks because they believe that their efforts will pay off.

Consequently, it’s clear that the language that teachers use affects student learning. It’s more than the delivery of information and instruction; learning is significantly influenced by the interactions that teachers have with students. Johnston (2004), discussed the role that language plays in students’ developing identity, a significant part of the mind-set that students must develop if they are to be successful in school.

Motivating Students

Motivating students is directly related to the ways in which teachers interact with students. Motivation is not about manipulating or bribing students to complete tasks, but rather it requires that students see the relevance of the task and bring to the task a belief that their efforts will bear fruit. It almost goes without saying that students are more likely to be motivated when



Students’ interactions with teachers, administrators, and other adults contribute to their development of identity and sense of self and help them develop their personal narratives, which significantly impact the choices that they make throughout their lives.

Watch the Video

Students share what motivates them.

www.nassp.org/PL1212fisher



they know that their teachers care, when their teachers are effective instructors, and when their teachers build students' agency and identity.

In the video that accompanies this column, we asked students to talk about what motivates them. Their statements affirm the role of the teacher as someone with the power to influence students' lives. In this column, we focus on accomplishments, identity, and agency. Although there are many other interactions that instructional leaders could attend to, in our experience, these three are very powerful in fostering a growth mindset in students.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

When teachers interact with students to recognize and praise their efforts, they should be careful about the attribution of the compliment. Teachers should ask themselves who is responsible for the accomplishment and for whom is the work being done? When teachers phrase compliments so that students understand their own roles in the accomplishment, they will begin to see that their efforts allow them to meet their goals. In doing so, teachers can guide students to "attend to their internal feelings of pride" (Johnston, 2004, p. 25), which will build students' internal motivation and reduce their need for external praise.

Unfortunately, some statements of praise position "the child in a subordinate position with respect to the teacher, the source of praise. It also subtly removes some of the responsibility for the accomplishment and gives it to the teacher" (p. 25). Consider the following statements and the way that they attribute success to the learner:

- "You figured that out. Feels good,



When teachers phrase compliments so that students understand their own roles in the accomplishment, they will begin to see that their efforts allow them to meet their goals.

huh? Tell me how you did it." This statement indicates to the student that the effort was effective, that there is or should be a sense of accomplishment, and that the teacher is interested in how the student did it. This statement also communicates that the student is someone who figures things out, which could influence the personal narrative that the student tells about him or herself.

- "I bet you are proud of yourself," allows students to reflect and realize that they are, or should be, proud of their efforts and accomplishments, rather than trying to please the teacher as "I am proud of you" does. This simple rephrasing of pride goes a long way in developing students' internal motivation.
- "Marcos, your group tells me that you were very helpful in figuring out the answer to this problem," acknowledges that the student has assisted his peers and that his contributions were valued. The attribution in this statement is to the peers and to the effort made by the student, rather than to pleasing the teacher. It is very likely that Marcos will be motivated to engage in simi-

lar behaviors in the future because he understands the impact of those behaviors on others.

IDENTITY

Identity is the development of a unique personality that is based on a person's interaction with the environment and the people in that environment. Johnston (2004) noted that "building an identity means coming to see in ourselves the characteristics of particular categories (and roles) of people and developing a sense of what it feels like to be that sort of person and belong in certain social spaces" (p. 23). Consider the following statements and the way that they contribute to the learner's identity:

- "How are you thinking like a historian today?" This question invites students to assume the role of a historian and think about what it means to do this type of work. There is a clearly communicated assumption that the student knows how historians think and can assume this identity.
- "Your opening line reminds me of one thing that other authors do. As a reader, I enjoy openings with a startling statement and you really captured that here." This comment suggests to the adolescent writer that he or she has engaged in writerly behaviors and that the reader enjoyed the approach. This builds the writer's identity, communicating that the writing was effective and that the writer should continue in this vein.
- "There are so many ways to solve this problem, and I see that you solved it two different ways. I know that mathematicians often solve problems several different ways to check on their findings. I'd

bet it was fun to see it work out both ways.” This communicates that the student is thinking like a mathematician and has solved the problem in ways that were effective. It also helps the student develop an identity as a problemsolver who enjoys working through complex situations.

AGENCY

People with a strong sense of agency believe that their efforts and accomplishments are linked. As Johnston (2004) noted, some students understand that “if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals” (p. 29). Other students, those who do not have a strong sense of agency, think that their efforts will likely be ineffective and if they do succeed it’s probably that they were lucky this time and that their luck won’t hold. In other words, “To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions.... The core features of agency enable people to play a part in their self- development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). Teachers can foster students’ agency through their use of language that builds “bridges between action and consequence that develop their sense of agency” (Johnston, 2004, p. 30). Consider the following statements and the way that they contribute to the learner’s agency:

- “Why?” is probably one of the most effective ways for building agency because reflecting on this question helps students understand the processes and procedures they use to accomplish things. As Johnston (2004) pointed out, “Asking why children do or say the things they do helps them develop

the consciousness and hence ownership of their choices” (p. 37).

- “What might you do next?” helps students plan actions that they believe will result in success. When students learn to verbalize their plans, they have concrete examples of their actions that were or were not effective. This statement also communicates to students that the teacher believes that the student knows what to do next. This is in contrast to situations in which the teacher assumes responsibility and tells the student what to do next. Agency is built when the teacher does not simply tell the student what to do, but rather when the teacher assumes competence and guides the student to perform.
- “You did it, but tell me how. I’m particularly interested in efforts that were and were not helpful.” This statement communicates to students that they were successful and that some of their efforts were useful and others were not. It gives students an opportunity to reflect on their actions and to determine which of those actions were useful and should be implemented again.

Building Narratives, Guiding Teachers

Instructional leaders have a lot to consider when they enter a classroom. There are artifacts to consider, instructional routines to evaluate, student work to examine, and interactions to monitor. As part of every classroom visit, as well as all of the interactions that occur outside of the classroom, the instructional leader should consider the ways in which language is used to help students build their narrative. Instructional leaders should ask:

- Is this interaction attributing

success to students?

- Is this interaction building student’s identity and agency?
- Is this interaction fostering a growth mind-set?

When the answer to any of these questions is no, it’s time to explore the reasons with the teacher. Block (2008) reminded us that, “We need to distinguish between the stories that give meaning to our lives and help us find our voice, and those that limit our possibility” (p. 35). The instructional leader, as one of his or her responsibilities, must help teachers learn to make those very distinctions. In doing so, students will begin to tell stories about themselves and their schools that include their successes and the value they place on learning. **PL**

REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26.
- Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine.
- Johnston, P. H. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children’s learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Douglas Fisher (dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, CA.

Nancy Frey (nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College.

Fisher and Frey are the authors, with Diane Lapp, of *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives* (2012, Solution Tree).