Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful tools available to teachers. It permeates every aspect of teaching and learning. We cannot give a lesson, welcome a child into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words. Children cannot do a science observation or reading assignment or learn a classroom routine without listening to and interpreting their teacher's words. And what they hear and interpret—the message they get from their teacher—has a huge impact on how they think and act, and ultimately how they learn.

Consider this scene: Lunch is over and the children, returning noisily to their classroom, are slow to settle into their seats. Some chatter

loudly while others rummage through their belongings or lean across desks to get in on some action across the table. Calmly, Ms. Gibbs rings a chime, a well-rehearsed signal for the children to be quiet and attend to her words. She waits a moment until the last child is settled, quiet, and looking at her, then says in a conversational voice, "I see that everyone is ready for math. Let's get started." The children's focus shifts to math, and the lesson gets underway.

A few simple words, carefully chosen and said with the appropriate tone and pacing, transformed the atmosphere and led the children to a mental place where they could learn at their best.

Here's how a different teacher might have handled the scene: Raising her voice to be heard above the chatter, the teacher nearly shouts, "Okay, settle down, everyone! Social time is over. We have to get to work on math now."

Although both teachers are responding to the same situation and both want to prepare the children for math, their uses of language send very different messages to the students. In the second example, the teacher's language implies that learning is about resisting pleasurable natural inclinations such as talking to friends so that we can do the less pleasant "work" of learning math. The phrase "have to" further reinforces the idea that math is something unpleasant that the children would not choose to do on their own. And by raising her voice to get the children's attention, the teacher conveys that she gains control by overpowering them.

Contrast this to Ms. Gibbs's language, which implies that learning is about working together to achieve mutually desirable and pleasurable goals. Attention is gained not through an overpowering voice, but a soft chime. Early in the year, Ms. Gibbs had carefully taught the children what the chime meant—stop whatever you're doing and pay attention to the teacher—and had given the children opportunities to practice responding to it. With that grounding, the use of the chime now allows the teacher to send a signal without having to overpower the children. She can then talk in a tone and volume that is in keeping with theirs. Her language implies that, given the opportunity, the children can and

will draw upon their own skills and intrinsic motivation to prepare to learn. In particular, the teacher reaffirmed this expectation when she said that the children were "ready for math."

The power of language makes language a prime teaching tool. As teachers, we come into the profession because of our belief in education and our desire to nurture children's growth. Language helps us do this nurturing. By learning to use teacher language to its full potential, we can more effectively turn our visions for students' learning into reality.

In this book, the term "teacher language" refers to the professional use of words, phrases, tone, and pace to enable students to engage in active, interested learning and develop positive behaviors. This kind of language rests on a deep and abiding faith in the goodness in children, a belief in their desire and ability to learn. It also rests on faith in teachers' ability to teach, to bring out the best in children. The book will discuss which kinds of language support these goals and beliefs and why. It'll offer practical guidelines and concrete examples of language to adopt as well as language to avoid.

First, a closer look at how language affects children's growth.

The Power of Language

Language is far more than the simple expression of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. As psychologist Lev Vygotsky said, language actually shapes thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It produces "fundamentally new forms of behavior." (Vygotsky 1986/1934, 24) Language does this in several ways: It molds our sense of who we are; helps us understand how we think, work, and play; and influences the nature of our relationships.

Language molds our sense of who we are

Our words can shape identities. What we say to others can deeply affect their sense of who they are and who they might become. The words of a teacher may have special power in this regard. I was struck by this fact when my friend Don told a story about his experience with

singing as a child. When Don was five, his mother, who loved to sing, enrolled him in a children's choir. "I had a very deep, booming voice for a little boy and, I suppose, a tin ear as well," Don recalled. "But I loved going to choir practice and singing with the other kids. I liked to stand in the front row and sing my heart out!" One day, as the group was preparing to perform, the music teacher said to Don, "Let's have you move to the back row and try just mouthing the words." "That was the moment I learned that I was not a singer," Don said, chuckling. "I never wanted to go back to choir practice again."

This music teacher was probably trying to be gentle with Don, and Don now tells this story with laughter. But the teacher's belief that he was not a singer, and never would be, came through to him loud and clear, even at the young age of five. The fact that Don, now forty-eight, still remembers and tells this story shows that the teacher's words had a deep impact on his developing sense of self. The words narrowed Don's sense of possible identities rather than broadening them. They conveyed a belief that his ability to sing was not only poor, but also would never change. Rather than trying to teach him how to sing better, this teacher effectively put a stop to Don's motivation to learn to sing.

What might this teacher have said instead? Perhaps "Don, you really put your heart and soul into singing! Would you like to learn more about it? I have some ideas." These words would have opened the doors to learning for Don and supported his budding identity as one who loves to sing. They would have conveyed the belief that the ability to sing can be developed in those who want to learn. Although Don may never have become a professional singer, he might very well have learned satisfying ways to contribute to the choir and continued to enjoy singing into adulthood.

LANGUAGE HELPS US UNDERSTAND HOW WE THINK, WORK, AND PLAY

In addition to shaping our sense of who we are, words help us understand how we think, work, and play. I experienced this recently in my own work as a graduate student. During a discussion with one of my

professors about a field project I was doing, I shared some problems and my approach to solving them. The professor listened, then said, "You seem to take a very intuitive approach to teaching." Though I had been a teacher for twenty years and had plenty of time to reflect on my teaching style, I had never thought of myself as intuitive. I wasn't even sure what it meant to teach intuitively. But my interest was piqued and the word "intuitive" resonated in my mind as I continued to go about my work. I began to notice the times I responded to students in ways that worked and seemed to arise spontaneously. I began to see aspects of my practice that I'd been unaware of and to understand these as "intuitive" teaching.

This new consciousness would have been powerful by itself. But in my case there was a second benefit: When I became curious about where this intuition came from, I became more aware of the amount of time I spent informally reflecting on my teaching. I realized that the more time I spent reflecting, the more often I used effective teaching practices that appeared spontaneous and intuitive. I learned that what was truly valuable in teaching was not so much spontaneity and intuitiveness, but effectiveness. I saw that the appearance of spontaneity and intuitiveness was a byproduct of repeated doing, reflecting, adjusting, doing again, reflecting, and so on. All this learning was sparked by my professor describing my work as "intuitive."

Teachers can use language to expand children's perceptions and insights just as my professor did for me. "I notice lots of juicy adjectives in your story," we might say. "I really get a sense of how your character looks and feels." Naming or describing a specific attribute—the use of juicy adjectives—alerts the writer to an important element of her writing and how it impacts the reader. Alternatively, a teacher might say only "You're a good writer" or "Great work!" Although such words may help the child form a positive identity, they don't help her understand what makes her a good writer. She doesn't hear words that help her see the elements that make her writing effective. Without seeing, she has a harder time knowing what to do similarly next time or what strengths to build upon.

LANGUAGE INFLUENCES THE NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS

Our words and tone of voice play a critical role in establishing the nature of our relationships. As teachers, we can choose language that forges a relationship of trust or one of mistrust between us and our students. I once had a student who had a reputation as one of the scariest bullies in the school. He was used to relationships with adults and other children that were built on threats and punishments. My tendency was to threaten and punish him as well. "Jim, if you don't stop it, no more recess! You're scaring the other children."

One day when I took him aside to deal with yet another incident, I was inspired to try some of the new conflict resolution language that I had been learning. "Jim, I saw you pushing Adam and Silas. You were yelling, too. Can you help me understand what happened from your point of view?"

Jim stared at me for a moment. Then his face, tense with anger, began slowly to relax. "You want me to tell you about it?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. I want to help, and I can only help if I understand how things are for you," I assured him. Jim slowly began to explain his point of view. He didn't stop being a bully at that moment—or that year—but we began to build a relationship based on more trust of each other. As a result, Jim slowly became less defensive and more open to my attempts to help him stop the bullying.

A teacher's words may also shape students' relationships with each other and with their learning. We can create an atmosphere of curiosity, engagement, and respectful interactions. "Listen carefully and see how many good questions your classmates come up with to ask at the museum." "Look at all the different patterns people in this class made with the blocks." "How many details can you detect in this set of minerals?" "Who heard an idea from someone else that they'd like to try?" "How will you help each other do your best learning today?" "How can we take care of each other when we go out to play kickball?" "What would you like to learn about Native Americans?" These are all questions and statements that influence children to respect and value their peers, and to become curious and engaged learners. Our careful

choice of words and tone leads children to build positive relationships with their learning and with fellow learners.

The Goals of Teacher Language

Skillful teacher language is language that supports students in three broad ways: developing self-control, building their sense of community, and gaining academic skills and knowledge. Across all of these areas, language is a tool that helps teachers articulate a vision, convey faith that students can attain it, give feedback that names students' strengths, and offer guidance that extends students' skills.

Developing self-control

It's safe to say that all teachers want their students to learn self-control. The key word here is "learn." We're not born with self-control; we learn it as we grow. There are critical conditions that facilitate this learning. As psychologist Edward Deci explains, to develop self-control, children have to have a growing sense of autonomy and competence—a sense that they are controlled by themselves rather than by a force from outside, and a sense that they are capable of achieving desired outcomes. (Deci and Flaste 1995) Our job as teachers is to help children develop this sense of autonomy and competence. We do this by giving them opportunities to become aware of themselves—what they do well, what they're interested in, how they're feeling, how they're changing—for children need to have this self-awareness in order to make conscious choices about their behavior. We also do it by giving them opportunities to practice generating ideas, making decisions, following through, and reflecting on the results.

Language plays a huge role in this equation. We can use words that reveal specific positive behaviors and skills we noticed, or words that offer only unrevealing generalities. We can use a tone of voice that encourages children to practice the skills that lead to autonomy and competence, or a tone that does the opposite. Effective language can be quite simple: We might say "I see you're working hard to add details" in a warm, calm voice. To a child who struggles with doing thorough work, this may be enough

to provide motivation. To a child who is impulsively flicking paper at classmates during quiet work time, we can say firmly yet kindly, "What should you be doing right now?" or "Show me how you will follow our rules for quiet work time." When a child begins to act out because he doesn't know how to solve a math problem, we might say calmly, "What's a way we talked about for handling frustration if you don't get something right away?" These simple reminders help students develop and reinforce a repertoire of constructive behaviors. They show faith in students and prompt them to draw upon their own resources to remember behavioral expectations and act on them. In this way, they help students experience autonomy and competence and develop self-control.

BUILDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In addition to a sense of autonomy and competence, we all have a basic human need to feel a sense of belonging. (Deci and Flaste 1995) For children in a classroom, this feeling is critical if they are to be motivated from within to learn. When they feel safe and valued, they're more willing to do the risk-taking and the cooperative give-and-take that lead to greater learning. (Jensen 1998)

We can foster all students' sense of belonging by using language that encourages everyone to value and practice cooperation, respect, and empathy. Following a science activity, a teacher says cheerfully but without gushing, "I noticed cleanup went quickly today because you were all helping each other." This gives children feedback about aspects of their behavior that were helpful. After observing hurtful behavior during recess, a teacher convenes a class meeting. He introduces the purpose of the meeting, then, using a matter-of-fact voice, poses an open-ended question to the whole group: "How might it feel to be told 'no' when you ask to join a game?" This encourages the children to imagine feelings they have not yet felt or to share feelings they have felt. With such language, teachers can guide students to behave in ways that allow all classmates to participate fully in classroom life and to see all classmates as members of their community.

Gaining academic skills and knowledge

Most of the language we use professionally is aimed at helping students develop academic skills and increase their knowledge. "I wonder how many different things we can observe about this bird's nest" fosters in children the skill of careful observation and the attitude of curiosity. "What are you most proud of about your work?" encourages reflection and self-critique. "It seems like you're using context clues to figure that word out" helps the child become conscious of a useful strategy that she might use again in the future.

Our language can also help children learn from each other, and here's where a sense of community again comes into play. When children feel safe with each other, they can engage in ways that stretch their academic skills and knowledge. Vygotsky calls this reaching into their "zone of proximal development," or that space between what they can do on their own and what they can do with help from someone a step or two more skilled. (Vygotsky 1986/1934) For example, a child who can't read a book on her own might be able to read it with a classmate who's at a higher reading level. The classmate might supply words the child doesn't know or take turns reading paragraphs with her. The two might discuss their ideas and questions about the book. All this pulls the less skilled child toward more complex reading and deepens the other child's skills as well. But in order for this kind of deep, constructive engagement to happen, students need to trust and respect each other, and a teacher's language is vital in helping the class build that trust and respect.

Finally, a byproduct of a teacher's skillful use of language is that the students often begin using language more skillfully themselves. For example, if in giving feedback on students' work, a teacher routinely names specific positives she notices (for example, by saying "You used a metaphor that makes the reader think") rather than issuing a global praise (such as "Good job!"), students may soon adopt that way of speaking when giving feedback to each other. (See Chapter 5 for more on this kind of reinforcing language.) And when the teacher models good listening by using pauses and paraphrasing, children are

likely to learn to do the same. (See Chapter 4 for more on skillful listening.) The result is that the classroom becomes a richer place of cooperative learning, with children more actively helping each other grow.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGING OUR LANGUAGE

Learning to use teacher language to its full positive potential means becoming aware of our habitual ways of speaking and the messages, positive or negative, that these may be sending to students. It means stepping back to "hear" ourselves and reflect, "What do I say? What tone do I use?" We can then try on and practice new words, phrases, tones, and pacings to replace any ineffective language patterns we may be using. Appendix B describes a language change process and offers tips that can help along the way.

This process of language change can feel different to different people. For some, a new way of speaking comes relatively quickly. For others, it's a slower evolution. Some teachers say that using new teacher language feels awkward or "phony" and "contrived" at first. Be assured that it feels that way because we're not used to it, not because it really is phony or contrived. If our intention behind the words is positive—if we truly believe in students' desire and ability to learn and to behave in helpful ways—our communication will feel sincere to them, even if it isn't technically polished or if it still sounds foreign to us.

For some teachers, perhaps especially those who've been teaching for a while, the awkwardness may be particularly unsettling because we're dealing with teaching, our field of expertise—an area of life that we're knowledgeable about, precisely the area in which we're not supposed to be awkward. This is an understandable reaction. It can help to remember that feeling unsettled or awkward is often a necessary and natural stage in learning and will pass with practice.

Whether language change comes quickly or slowly, the prize is a more satisfying way to teach. Our classrooms become places where children learn to take care of themselves, their learning, each other, and the world in a different, more joyful way. In short, better language makes us better teachers and our students better learners.

Works Cited

Deci, Edward L. and Richard Flaste. 1995. *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation*. New York: Penguin Books.

Jensen, Eric. 1998. *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Vygotsky, Lev. 1986/1934. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.