

2. How frequently do you have time to think about justice and ethics in your daily practice? How might you make these concepts more “present” every day?
3. How have you been thinking about the concept of diversity up to this point in your career? What do you think of the idea of diversity as the norm?
4. Are there any ethical issues in your educational past or present that you strongly feel should be addressed by your profession?
5. Is “social justice” a term with which you are politically comfortable as an educator? Why or why not?

Teacher Talk Is Teacher Action!

All teachers have a powerful and readily available tool to support their daily intentions to enact ethics and justice in their classrooms. That tool is their “teacher talk”—the language that they use in daily life to discuss and describe the children they teach. Your words are with you every day—in and out of the classroom. This chapter will focus on the ways in which you characterize and talk about your children in your professional setting.

How does the way you talk about your students outside the classroom affect the way you teach? All of your words count. They embody and enact the ways in which you choose to see your students, and the ways in which you want others to see them. All of the good intentions you have to be an ethical advocate who respects diversity must be reflected in the words you use to describe your students. This chapter will connect teacher talk and teacher action. As we explore the importance of educational language, our hypothetical teacher-guides will be with us to demonstrate the efforts they make to counteract deficit-based talk about children in their schools.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER TALK

As a teacher educator, I have spent a great deal of time supervising student teachers in urban, rural, and suburban schools. Over the years, as I listened to the talk of educators in schools, I became increasingly aware of the routine use of deficit terminology and denigrating descriptions of children in many school settings:

- “Low-income students”
- “Parents who don’t care”
- “Homes that don’t value education”
- “Kids who start school way behind”
- “The kids who are poor have limited vocabularies”
- “This school is filled with at-risk kids”

I realized that many sincere and dedicated educators did not see an ethical conflict in the use of deficit-based descriptions of children and families. The use of such language in schools—especially schools serving a large number of immigrants, children of color, or children who were poor—appeared to be an accepted norm. As my interest in this topic grew, I started to raise it for discussion with the teachers in my graduate classes. Many readily admitted that such talk was commonplace in their schools, particularly in the teachers' lounge. However, they believed that what they said outside of the classroom did not influence the way they or others treated children in the classroom.

Does what we say outside our classroom have an impact on what happens to our students? I became fascinated with that question and undertook a study of linguistic theory to find the answer. The more I read, the greater my realization that every word we say about our students has a very important impact on their well-being.

In his influential book *How to Do Things with Words*, linguistic philosopher John Austin (1962) indicated that words were not so much descriptive as active—they were always *doing something*. When asked, "Can saying it make it so?" Austin replied with his belief that "the uttering of words is . . . the leading incident in the performance of an act" (p. 8, emphasis in original). Similarly, John Searle, in *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969), called words a form of action and described them as *speech acts* that not only made things happen, but made it likely that they would continue to happen in exactly the same way (Fennimore, 2008).

Once we realize that the language that we use to describe children is a behavior with significant repercussions, we must recognize the relationship of our teacher talk to the ethical standards that exist for all our professional behaviors. The words we choose can enhance the lives of children in our care or bring them harm. For example, let's think about a hypothetical teacher who calls his students "slow" or "delayed" or "unmotivated" in the teachers' lounge. His words are acting to create the likelihood that those listening also will begin to think of the students in that light. In some present or future situation, the listeners might act with lowered expectations or some other form of negativity toward the children under discussion. The children would be affected by the negativity and lowered expectations, and might respond with deep discouragement about themselves as learners. Once said, words have an impact far beyond our reach.

As we consider the above situation, we also need to think about the way we *ourselves* are influenced by the way we talk about our students. The ingrained habit of thoughtful reflectiveness on anything we say about our students strengthens our professional practice. When we regularly

speak respectfully about students' strengths we are much more likely to see and act on them in our classrooms. Likewise, routine negative denigration of our students outside the classroom will have an inevitable effect on the way we interact with them in the classroom. Our words create an important aura around everything we do and say as teachers.

LANGUAGE IS A SOCIAL ACT

Vygotsky emphasized language as a socially generated phenomenon; it is our tool for communication with others and *always has the intended outcome of influencing others* (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Bakhtin (1986) explains how all of our words emerge from that totality of a dynamic interpersonal exchange. The words that we use when we speak have been taken from others and also will be used by others. Once used, our words no longer belong just to us.

The term *discourse* refers to the consideration of language as a social practice. As we talk with others, we represent our personal perception of social realities and we also take a personal position on social problems (Thomas, 2011). Through these representations we publicly construct an identity for ourselves as well as for others. Thus, our discourse about our students is never "neutral"; we are saying who we are as teachers as we also seek to influence the ways in which we and our students are perceived by our listeners (Goffman, 1959). Ultimately, our discourse constructs the language environment of our schools and programs.

Let's use the example of educational discourse about disability. The field of early childhood education has been steeped in a deficit model of understandings about disability, which often is reduced to a set of deficiencies and problems inherent in the bodies of individuals (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). This deficit model is not inevitable; it represents a choice of language and a thus a social choice of position toward the existence of disability.

It is entirely possible to construct a different disability discourse—one that considers people with disabilities as competent; their differences are interesting and have the capacity to enrich the lives of others (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). Such an approach would focus in some ways on the differences in bodies and minds of students with disabilities, but would focus more on the similarities and strengths that connect all who experience human life (Danforth & Gabel, 2006). This alternative form of discourse would eliminate the idea that "there is something wrong with a person with a disability." Considering the dynamic social nature of discourse, our positive approach to disability would construct our identity as teachers

who respect human differences; it also would construct the identity of the person with the disability as *able*, albeit in different ways, to live a life that is valued and should be respected equally with all other life.

Aaneira Focuses on Parents and Makes a Plan

Aaneira has become increasingly aware of a number of stratifications in the suburban community in which she has been a teacher in a federally funded inclusive pre-K program. Although the pre-K program is open to all the children in the suburb, one of the federal funding requirements was that a percentage of the children meet lower income criteria and that another percentage have identified disabilities. Aaneira is concerned, as families and caregivers drop children off and wait to pick them up, that they tend to associate in small groups—those whose children fall into the lower income and disabilities categories tend to stay to themselves; those associated with the more affluent children also stand apart and speak only with one another.

Aaneira wants to create a community of parents and learners, and decides first to do something about parent talk she frequently overhears about “the special-needs kids.” She gets the feeling that a number of the parents tolerate the presence of children with disabilities in the program, but do not see those children as equal to their own. Aaneira is planning the first of three workshops, all of which the program requires parents to attend. She decides to focus on disability-related identity and language.

As she plans the workshop, Aaneira makes sure that she assigns each parent to a small group that includes parents with higher and lower incomes as well as parents of children with disabilities. The workshop will be called “What’s My Name?” Parents will first talk in small groups about the origins of their own first names. Then they will create hypothetical first names for themselves based on something they like to do and think they are good at doing. Following this, all the parents will circulate, introducing themselves to one another with their hypothetical names: “Hi, I’m Mountain Climber,” “Hi, I’m Pet Shelter Volunteer,” “Hi, I’m Good Cook,” “Hi, I’m Great Listener.”

Aaneira will follow this activity, which is always fun for everyone, with a short talk on how good it is to have the power to name ourselves based on our strengths and competencies. She will ask the parents to think briefly about the ways in which they would not identify themselves—possibly faults or things that they cannot do very well. Then, the parents in small groups will give their own children hypothetical names based on their strengths and competencies, and share them with their small groups. Aaneira will end the workshop by listening to the new names created for all the children and indicate her determination as the teacher to avoid child labeling and to recognize child abilities. She will invite the parents to think in similar ways and avoid ableism by seeing all children as competent learners and speaking about them with that in mind.

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

It is helpful to think of any language we use that is related to our students and our professional responsibilities as our *educational language*. This differs from our casual social language because it is part of the work to which we are dedicated and for which we are remunerated. In my book *Talk Matters: Refocusing the Language of Public Schooling* (2000), I define educational language as the way in which educators discuss, describe, categorize, and verbally expect behavior and achievements from the children in their classrooms. It is “what is said, how it is said, why it is said, and the intended and unintended outcomes of saying it” (p. 2).

The educational language that is used by everyone in the school creates the *language environment* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). The language environment in any early childhood setting is unique; it is composed of what all the professionals in that setting are saying to one another every day. Visitors to schools quickly can perceive the language environment—it tends to paint a clear picture of the attitudes of teachers and administrators toward their students. Thus we never *just talk*! The totality of our educational language takes on a life of its own and has a tangible impact on everyone who hears us.

When we listen carefully to the discourse that is utilized in a school or program, we can begin to critically analyze the educational language environment. In *critical discourse analysis*, what is left out and not said can be as important as what is said (Johnson & Stephens, 2012). Why, for example, would an educator bring to our attention that a certain child has a parent in prison, but leave out the fact that the other parent is working exceptionally hard to help that child in every possible way? Or, why would an administrator indicate that his high-poverty school has inferior students, but leave out the fact that a good percentage of the students are performing on a very high level? In a different vein, why might an educator attribute the success of students in her affluent school to “parents who care about their children and value schooling,” but leave out the fact that there has been a high incidence of bullying in that school? These are *choices* that reflect the ways in which the educators want their students to be viewed by others.

We need to ask why these educators are choosing to make either the positive or negative attributes more visible to others. The ways in which we discuss children may be a matter of habit to some degree, but ultimately we need to look beneath the surface for the political interplay of social privilege and oppression in our language environment and discourse about our students. It may be unsettling to realize that we are choosing to lower the perceptions of others about the students we teach, but that realization opens the door to reflection and a different set of choices.

Kira Stands Up to Negative Talk About Children in Public Housing

From her first day in her transitional kindergarten, Kira became aware of problems in the ways her students were viewed and discussed in the school. As a new teacher, she did not feel comfortable with the idea of confronting teachers who expressed negative thoughts and low expectations for her children. She acknowledged that the children had exhibited some learning and behavior problems last year, and that she found them challenging at times. But she also enjoyed them and respected their resiliency. They deserved a new chance to be free from old labels this year!

Much of the deficit terminology Kira has heard about her students seems to focus on their poverty; most of the children reside in nearby public housing. Kira decides that, in addition to her own ethical language about her students, she is going to try to change the way that other teachers perceive and talk about their lives and abilities. Last summer, Kira had made the decision to take a day to visit the children's neighborhood. There was a warm and friendly community representative in the housing complex, who introduced her to many people and showed her many resources that existed for the children and their families.

One of the most interesting things Kira learned was that a group of artists in the area had developed a free summer art program for the children in the community. Last summer, quite a few of her students had participated in the program, which had focused on art forms in their environment. The community representative showed her a beautiful model of the neighborhood, complete with the playground that had been built with the help of community activists. All of the children in the summer program had helped to make the model.

Kira was allowed to borrow the model, and she worked with the principal and school librarian to display it in the library for a few months. She took a picture of her whole class in front of the display and put it on her hallway bulletin board. Under the picture, she placed sentence strips with the comments the children made about the display. For the remainder of the year, whenever she heard a negative reference to her students or the housing project she would say something like, "Did you see their wonderful artistic replica of their neighborhood? I am so proud of them and they are proud of their work."

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Critical discourse analysis helps us to understand the cultural politics of language (Cohen, 2010). Sociocultural theory supports the idea that cultural politics play out in the ways that student identities (and the parts of student identities we choose to emphasize) are mediated in the context of schooling. The labeling of children is central to the idea of cultural

politics—labels are dynamic actions, reactions, and interactions that often determine success or failure in schooling (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). When we use labels we are using our power over others—to determine, for example, whose exceptionality is positive ("gifted") and whose exceptionality reflects supposed inferiority ("socially and emotionally disturbed"). We are neither neutral nor passive when we ascribe characteristics to children—we are making cultural and political decisions about how they will be represented in school and society (Cohen, 2010).

Language Reflects Teacher Culture

Vygotsky, in his analysis of language as a social medium, believed that language is the product of the social history of a cultural group (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Teachers have all been raised and educated in specific cultural structures characterized by repeated thoughts and actions about and toward others (Warren & Webb, 2007). Their educational language inevitably will reflect their cultural experiences and beliefs.

Many teachers in America are in classrooms with children whose cultural experiences are different from their own. In these cases, the teachers inevitably will position and define themselves in relationship to the diversities they are called upon to understand (Cummins, 1989). Their educational language, as we discussed earlier, will reflect the identity they construct for themselves as well as the identities they construct for their students.

Critical discourse analysis in such situations is helpful. Are students routinely discussed as deficient, or unmotivated, or unintelligent? Any school language environment characterized by habitual deficit-based representations of students raises the question of teacher-student cultural misalignment. This misalignment may privilege some students (i.e., students whose lives are culturally similar to those of the teachers) and oppress others (such as the students whose lives and experiences create a position of bias on the part of the teacher).

Emilio Forms a Coalition and Makes a Plan

As a 3rd-grade bilingual teacher in a high-poverty urban school, Emilio is very uncomfortable with the language environment of his school. He thinks it reflects a general bias toward the children of the poor as well as a specific bias toward the children in the bilingual program. Emilio hears talk in the teachers' lounge expressing disagreement with bilingual education because "the kids should just be expected to speak English once they get to school." He was very upset one day to hear a child spoken of as a "wetback"; the speaker did not realize Emilio was in the room.

Emilio is good friends with several other teachers in the building. He invites them to lunch in his classroom and expresses his discomfort with the persistently negative talk about the children in the school. Emilio also talks about the disrespect toward the children in the bilingual program. He shares his idea: The assembled group could join together and agree to consistently model interest in Spanish and positive talk about the children in general.

The group comes to consensus around two ideas. The first is that, with Emilio as volunteer translator, they routinely will each place some Spanish words under the English words on their hallway bulletin boards. The second is that they will shape their responses to deficit-based comments about the children in the school in three ways: (1) They will indicate that they are committed to teaching the children well; (2) they will identify a positive ability or characteristic of the children; and (3) they will acknowledge the difficulties of teaching and encourage their colleague to be positive and hopeful. “Yo quiero darle a estos estudiantes todas las oportunidades que pueda. Mis estudiantes están trabajando muy duro este año. No siempre es fácil ver algunos de los obstáculos que tienen nuestros estudiantes en sus vidas. Tenemos que crear que nuestros esfuerzos están haciendo una diferencia.” [“I want to give these students all the opportunities that I can. My class is working so hard this year. Of course it is not easy for us to see some of the struggles our students have in their lives. We have to believe that our efforts are making a real difference.”]

DESIGN YOUR EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE TO
AVOID CATEGORIZING CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

The educational language you use today has been shaped by many forces, including your own teacher preparation and the culture of the school or program in which you work or have had field experiences. All teachers undoubtedly have some forms of bias and also encounter bias in the attitudes and expressions of other professionals. I believe that every one of us can benefit a great deal from reflecting on our own talk about children in the context of our social and cultural experiences.

Categorizing Children in Schools

We humans have the tendency to “think with our categories” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). Once we categorize children in schools, we tend to consistently think of them in one way rather than another. In my book *Talk Matters* (2000), I identified three ways in which children tend to be categorized in schools. These are: (1) deficit terminology (broad deficit-based generalizations about children with certain cultural or

racial characteristics), (2) labels and scores on standardized test scores (achievement-based characteristics), and (3) confidential family information (access to family information that can raise or lower the status of children within schools and programs). Most teachers in my graduate classes find it interesting and helpful to analyze the language environment of their schools using these three categories as a guide.

Listen to the Talk!

Listen attentively to discussions about children in your school. If you are aware of deficit terminology (“at risk,” “Title I kids,” “free-lunch students,” “lower kids”), take note of the terms you hear most frequently. Also, think about labels and any groupings based on assessments or standardized test scores (“proficient kids,” “disabled,” “bottom-level readers”) and take note of them as well. Then, think about the ways in which confidential information about families can become a categorization (“single-parent families,” “public assistance families,” “parents who care/don’t care,” “parent in jail,” “professional parent”). This will give you a good portrait of the language environment of your school or program. You then can start to think about how you might have a greater impact on that language environment.

Re-naming Our Categories

Johnston (2004) developed the idea of “noticing and naming” as a literacy strategy. Teachers were encouraged to pay close attention to the reading strategies that students were using and to name them for the students so they would be more aware of a competency that was helping them. Laman, Miller, and Lopez-Robertson (2012) extended the concept of noticing and naming to the importance of noticing and naming the skills of children that defy the labels to which they have been assigned in school. (“She is labeled socially and emotionally disturbed, but when she is really interested in an activity she cooperates so well with the other kids.”) You can notice, name, and challenge the ways in which categories influence your thinking—and you can help others to expand their perception of children as well. It is always possible to identify new names based on what you see in your classroom every day.

Jordan Starts to Notice and Name

Jordan has been head teacher for the 3- to 5-year-old children in his rural child-care center for the past 5 years. Like many of the teachers in the center,

he has become accustomed to thinking about the children in certain ways. The center has a sliding-fee scale and receives government funding for the children of migrant workers and those whose families are below the poverty line. Some of the children live on farms; others live in small homes or trailers that are quite remote. If the families do not own cars, the children rarely leave their home settings to go to libraries or stores or other places in town.

Since Jordan began working for his graduate degree at a local university, he has become fascinated by the ways in which the social justice teaching discussed in his courses applies to his child-care setting. He realizes that he and the other teachers routinely have been referring to the children's "lack of experience" and "limited environments." He has begun to realize that they have been devoting their own rural lifestyles as well as those of the children—rural as compared with suburban and urban has taken on the habitual characterization of "less than."

Jordan asked the director if he might have 15 minutes to speak at the next faculty meeting. In his center, teachers are always welcome to ask for time to share ideas or raise issues for consideration. Jordan talks about the beauty of the rural area, the importance of farming, and the contribution of the migrant workers. He suggests that everyone start to notice what is interesting and beneficial about rural life in a small community. "Let's stop calling rural life 'limited' and let's start noticing and naming all the things that our children know and can do because of their rural cultures and lifestyles." He places several large Post-it charts in the faculty room with some pens and suggests that for the next month faculty notice, name, and write down the competencies, abilities, and interests of all the students. For example, many of them help farm and care for animals; others have learned a lot about streams, plants, and wooded areas. Jordan hopes that this will be a good beginning to enriching and changing the language environment of his center.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My research and writing in the area of educational language have given me the opportunity to talk with many teachers in professional development or at conferences about this issue. I have found over the years that there are two questions that almost any group of teachers will raise. They are good questions!

Can't We Tell the Truth?

Many teachers have asked whether I am suggesting that it is unethical to be truthful about the problems presented by students. Do I expect them to pretend that the children do not have serious problems? That they are all academically on target? My response is that it is appropriate

and necessary to discuss specific problems in the context of seeking a solution. What must be avoided are broad, biased generalizations about certain groups of children.

For example, saying, "I just can't find a way to motivate my children in math right now, so I am searching for new techniques" is different from saying, "My students are not motivated to learn math." Likewise, saying, "I am struggling to find a way to help my children to develop stronger self-control" is very different from saying, "This is the toughest group of kids I have ever encountered." Central to the discussion of child-related problems should be the strong and concerned voices of teachers who hold themselves responsible for addressing the needs of children, however problematic, in a positive way.

What About Venting?

We educators have difficult jobs and we do encounter problems. At times, despite our very best efforts, we become frustrated and discouraged. Can't we share our feelings with colleagues to gain some support? My answer is, yes, we all need to share our experiences, and we all need to vent! Let's say, for example, that you have been making many efforts to give extra support to a child in class. However, you discover one day that the child's parent has indicated to the program director that you are "not doing enough." You might be furious! You have 30 children in the group, you work for hours before and after school to create a wonderful curriculum, and you indeed have done a great deal to help this child! What might you do?

My advice is that we should seek reciprocal relationships with a few trusted colleagues who share our dedication and commitment to ethical talk. We can agree that, at appropriate times and behind closed doors, we will listen to and support one another when we are upset or angry or frustrated. However, we will do this with the mutual understanding that we are venting with one another in confidence because our emotions or concerns in a certain situation require us to seek support and counsel. We are talking about our challenges and the way they are making us feel, which is very different from deficit-based or denigrating talk about our students and their families.

TALK IS ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Language is a fascinating area from a theoretical and philosophical perspective. It is also a critically important component of every school and program serving children. Language can convey our professionalism, our

sense of efficacy, and our hopes and dreams for our students. It also can, however, convey bias, low expectations, and harmful labels. It is up to each and every one of us to consciously shape our professional use of language to reflect our deepest beliefs about social justice for all children.

As you can see from the actions of our teacher-guides, commitment to positive talk about children, interventions in our classrooms, and active advocacy are intertwined. The teachers knew it would take more than speaking positively themselves; they had to find concrete ways to lead others by example. It takes critical advocacy to see the power and positioning in language; it takes traditional advocacy to think of something helpful that can be done. We engage in participatory advocacy by modeling positive and productive language about children, and by taking advantage of situations in which our voice can be heard and make a difference.

SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

Many teachers and graduate students have told me that the concept of changing talk in their schools seems very complex. They have so many daily responsibilities in their classrooms that they just do not feel they have the time to address such a big issue. I suggest starting with small steps and waiting for opportunities to enlarge the impact they can have in the area of language about children in school. Following are some ways to get started.

Increase Your Own Language Awareness

This is a good time to start listening more closely to what is said and what is not said in your school or program. Be a language observer: How are the children represented in the ways that professionals talk with one another. What seems positive? What might you want to change if you could? Also, of course, this is a good time to be more aware of the ways in which you talk about children yourself. Has any bias crept into your descriptions of children? Have you been affected over time by the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the language environment of your school? Just start by taking some time to listen a bit more carefully to yourself and to others.

Develop a Personal Strategy for Responding to Bias

If you become aware that you are drawn into negative conversations about children, this is a good time to think about a personal strategy for responding to bias. For example, let's say that two other teachers on your grade level seem to be complaining constantly about the quality of students currently attending the school. You can think of a response to this

that is neither argumentative nor confrontational. If you are at a grade-level meeting to discuss curriculum, and a negative conversation about the quality of the students arises, you might say, "These are some interesting problems. I want to help solve them—what might we do today to get started?" At some point you may want to take a stronger stance of advocacy, but many teachers like to start with making a positive comment with the intent of moving from deficit-based talk to helpful solutions.

Follow the Teacher-Guides

In this chapter, our teacher-guides gave us some good ideas for language-related strategies. If you are teaching a group of children that is considered "low" or "less than," try demonstrating projects or assignments that honor their home environments and growth as learners. Bring these to the attention of others in the school and model your own positive and respectful talk about the students. If you are concerned about the language environment in general, you might see whether you can form a small coalition of like-minded colleagues and decide on a positive and structured approach to negative comments about the students. At some point you might have the chance to do a workshop for teachers or parents that addresses the issue of language. Finally, taking your own steps to notice child competencies and give new names to children with deficit-based labels will give you a great start in the right direction.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize the language environment of your school or program? If a visitor came to listen to what educators were saying about the children during the day, what impression would the visitor come away with?
2. How much do you think the classification of children does or does not affect the ways in which they are spoken about by educators?
3. What do you think about the idea that denigrating or deficit-based talk about children outside the classroom does not affect the ways in which children are treated inside the classroom? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. What goals would you set for yourself in terms of the ways in which you describe children? In terms of the ways you tend to respond to deficit-based conversations of others?
5. The teacher-guides in this chapter went well beyond their classroom responsibilities to be language-related advocates for their students. Would you consider such actions a possibility for you in your own school? Why or why not?