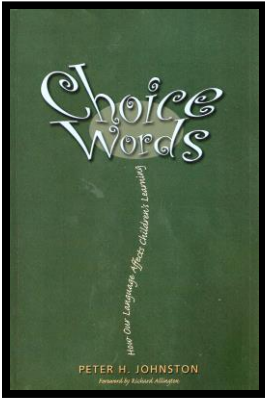


Excerpts from *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* by Peter H. Johnston



If we have learned anything from Vygotsky (1978), it is that **“children grow into the intellectual life around them”** (p.88). That intellectual life is fundamentally social, and language has a special place in it. Because the intellectual life is social, it is also relational and emotional. To me, **the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities - intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings.** Observing these teachers accomplish both goals convinced me that the two achievements are not completely at odds.

“I like the way you figured that out,” attributes the accomplishment entirely to the student. This final step offers the student a retrospective narrative about the event in which she stars as the successful protagonist, a collaborative fantasy that makes it possible for the child to become more than herself.

“This is not like you. What is the problem you have encountered? Okay, how can you solve it?”

A teacher naming a child **“class poet,”** inviting her to try on that mantle, can also make it so.

Teachers can position children as competitors or collaborators, and themselves as referees, resources, or judges, or in many other arrangements.

The implications of talking about reading as **“work”** are different from referring to it as **“fun.”** Similarly, telling children they can have free choice time, **“but first we have to finish our reading,”** positions reading poorly simply by using the words **“have to.”**

“I see you know how to spell the beginning of that word.” The most important piece is to confirm what has been successful (so it will be repeated) and simultaneously assert the learner's competence so she will have the confidence to consider new learning. Marie Clay (1993) refers to this as attending to the **“partially correct.”** Its significance cannot be overstated.

“Remember the first week when we had to really work at walking quietly? Now you guys do it automatically.” Often teachers draw children's attention to their learning histories.

“How else...”

It is wonderful when a child solves a problem. We can then ask her to regale us with the story of how she solved it, building her sense of agency. After having done that is the perfect time to ask how else she might have solved it.

“What if...?” Thinking flexibly and metaphorically involves expanding the imagination, and what-if questions insist on an imaginative act.

“(Silence)” On the face of it, **remaining silent seems quite trivial, but research shows that extending thinking times is positively related to more student talk, more sustained talk, and more “higher order” thinking...** When a teacher waits for a child to figure something out or self-correct, it conveys the message that she expects the child to be able to accomplish it. Failure to wait conveys the opposite message.

“You guys say such important things, it amazes me you would talk while others are talking.”

“What are you thinking? Stop and talk to your neighbor about it.”

“You managed to figure that out with each other's help. How did you do that?”