View From the Chalkboard

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« In my classroom, we walk the talk! »

The Power of Talk: Making Room for All Voices to Be Heard

As I start my day, I talk to my family about the news and the weather. At work, my colleagues and I talk about the latest books we've read, our families, and our students. All of this talk feels social and familiar, and it helps me process my world and the world at large. This makes me think of my second graders. I work in an economically and culturally diverse suburban school; I often wonder how I can create a classroom where no child is overlooked.

After reading *Talking Their Way Into Science* by Karen Gallas (1995), I was inspired to create a talk community. The practice of class talk alters us; we "learn how to discuss and think together" (Gallas, 1995, p. 30). Teachers have the power to establish a talk community by simply making it part of their classroom.

The first step I took in starting a talk community was to become a good listener. Now, I write down what my students say during class talks and chart their conversations. We sit together, and I establish an important rule: No one raises their hand. I model respectful conversations and coach students' discussions. What I have gleaned from my students' talk and how they say it—or don't say it—better directs me as a teacher.

An inclusive talk community allows the children to bring their schemata (past experiences) into the classroom. There are opportunities for class talk in every part of the day. We start with a morning meeting, where students can talk about life outside of school. Students light up when what they do at home is valued at school. Whether it's a read-aloud, mathematics, social studies, or science, the students always have their long-term talk partner by their side to construct meaning of the text, solve problems, and build ideas about the world.

Talk partners are different from reading and writing partners, who are often matched by ability. I create partnerships by carefully watching the kids. After a few weeks of whole-class observation, I match students by personality and need: a shy student with an outgoing student, an English learner with a highly proficient English speaker, or a reluctant writer with an avid writer. The most important ingredient is working to create an environment where partners trust each other, build on each other's strengths, and feel safe to take risks.

Based on data collected in my classroom, partner talks seem to play an integral role in advancing students' content knowledge and vocabulary. It raises every student's game.

Imagine that during interactive read-aloud, Jane, a new student from Costa Rica, is partnered with Susan, a highly verbal English-speaking student. Jane sketches and labels her ideas of the main character while Susan shares her partner's ideas with the class. Both students benefit. One student builds her vocabulary while the other broadens her vocabulary.

My experience as an elementary school teacher has made me abundantly aware of how race, class, and social status create achievement gaps. To that end, I believe a skilled literacy teacher can help close the gap. This experience has positioned me to develop a classroom that focuses on empathy, community, and talk. This combination builds a talk community and allows all voices in my classroom to be heard. In my classroom, we walk the talk!

REFERENCE

Gallas, K. (1995). *Talking their way into science: Hearing children's questions and theories, responding with curricula*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.