Empower Students with Your Words

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Abstract

Words can be powerful tools to engage students with disabilities in self-determined behaviors. When teachers are cognizant of their choice of words and manner of interaction, they can empower students to develop a sense of who they are, what they are capable of doing, and why they behave the way they do. This article explores how everyday dialogues between teachers and students can enhance and impede students with disabilities to develop essential skills of self-awareness, self-advocacy, problem-solving, and psychological empowerment.

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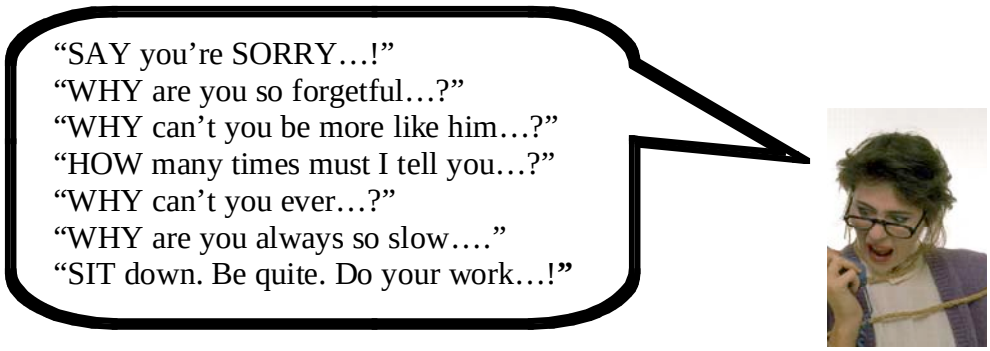


Do teachers use words that leave students feeling distressed, discouraged, degraded, or ashamed? OR

Do teachers use words that make students feel confident, uplifted, self-assured, or proud of themselves?

Do teachers use directives so they can manipulate students to behave and respond in the way they expect? OR

Do teachers interact in such a way so that students feel safe to express themselves, solve their problems, and regulate their own behavior?

Teachers may not always be aware that the words they use and the tone of their voice can leave students questioning who they are, what they are capable of doing, and why they act in certain ways. The manner in which teachers instruct, reprimand, or counsel students can have a powerful effect on the ability and willingness of students with disabilities to express themselves, advocate for what they want, solve obstacles that are in their way, and modify their behavior to get what they want. Teacher interaction with students in and out of the classroom plays a significant role in creating the kind of environment and climate necessary for students to engage in self-determined behavior.

Self-determination has been described as a set of attitudes and abilities necessary to take control over one's life (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Whemeyer, 1998). Helping students with disabilities become self-determined has been a national priority for over a decade [see box, "Self-determination for students with disabilities"]. However, promoting self-determination requires a close examination of not only the instructional strategies and curriculum programs, but also conditions surrounding students where learning takes place (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mithaug, 1996).

Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

Historically, the term self-determination refers to the right of nations to self-governance. But over the last few decades, self-determination has been reconceptualized as people with disabilities having the "right" to choose and control their lives without unnecessary interference from outside influences (Nirje, 1972; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). According to Wehmeyer (1992), an act or event is considered self-determined if:

- X the person acted autonomously;
- X the person's behavior was self-regulated;
- X the person initiated and responded in a psychologically empowered manner; and
- X the person acted in a self-realizing manner.

Lack of self-determination is a serious problem with serious consequences for many people with disabilities. In the 1980s, numerous national reports (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Health Resources and Services Administration, and Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 1992) revealed that students with disabilities are not experiencing as many positive outcomes as their nondisabled peers. The unemployment rate for young men with disabilities was 3 times greater than that for nondisabled youths and 4.5 times greater than that for young women with disabilities.

Results from follow-up studies (e.g., Affleck, Edgar, Levine, & Kortering, 1990; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985; Neel, Meadows, Levine, & Edgar, 1988; Scuccinmarra & Speece, 1990; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997) further confirmed that students with disabilities are dropping out of school at a higher rate than their nondisabled peers. The cause for concern increased when the 16th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act revealed that up to 40% of students with disabilities were dropping out of school and was either unemployed or underemployed (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

In 1990, the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) funded a series of projects to study ways to enhance the self-determination of students with disabilities (Ward & Kohler, 1996). Since then, numerous studies have been conducted to study the components of self-determination and how to help students with disabilities become more self-sufficient young adults (Wehmeyer, 1999).

Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (1996) reviewed literature reporting the various constructs of self-determination and concluded that the school is the optimal environment for teaching self-determination because students can revisit their choices, teachers can promote goal-directed behaviors and encourage critical perspectives, and school administrators can corroborate mentoring programs and provide role modeling to students. Hence, teaching students with disabilities skills of self-determination while they are still in school is a way to ensure that they will be better able to direct their own lives when they become adults (Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1993; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000).

More often than not, students with disabilities who lack self-determination become financial drains on society (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Naturally, such detraction affects the overall well-being of a competitive economy that many work hard to maintain. It is therefore imperative that students with disabilities be taught skills of self-determination before they are "thrust into the cold water of postschool reality" (Martin, Marshall, Maxsom, & Jerman, 1993, p. 4).

Needless to say, learning conditions which encourage students with disabilities to express themselves, take appropriate risks, and solve problems are more likely to enhance skills of self-determination (Field, Hoffman & Posch, 1997; Field & Hoffman, 2002) than conditions that are intimidating, coercive, and rigid. In this paper, we invite teachers to reflect on three questions and examine scenarios of non-examples and examples of how teacher interaction can frustrate or enhance student development of self-determination.

1. Do you usually ignore and dismiss students' self-expression?

Scenario I

Student: I HATE math. It's BORING!

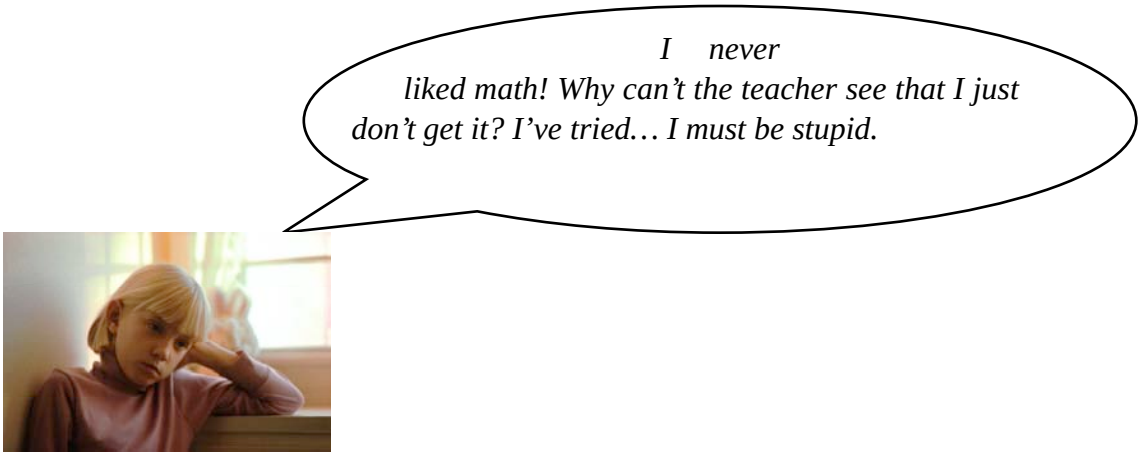
Teacher: You've always LIKED math and who says math is boring! *(rejects student's feeling with a rhetoric)*

Student: I can't do the questions; they are too hard.

Teacher: No, they are not hard. These are easy questions. You're just not trying hard enough. *(judges, criticizes, and degrades student's ability)*

Student: This is dumb!

Teacher: Don't say that. Math is not dumb! Whether you like it or not, finish up the work. *(reprimands student for expressing herself and then use authoritarian control to dismiss the student)*



One of the fundamental components of becoming self-determined is for students to acquire reasonable knowledge of who they are. When teachers dismiss or ignore students' expression as false, unjustifiable, or inaccurate, students begin to adopt a mindset of distrusting their own feelings and doubting their ability to ascertain how they feel. Gradually, students begin to rely on other people to tell them how they *should* feel and what they are capable of doing because others appear to know them better than they know themselves.

At times, students with disabilities have difficulty articulating how they feel, and at other times, they say what others expect of them in order to gain approval. If students are unable to honestly express themselves, they will be less willing and able to advocate for what they want, take appropriate risks, or make decisions to reach their goals.

Whether they are expressions of boredom, frustration, anger, anxiety, uncertainty or mere stupidity, teachers need to make a deliberate effort to acknowledge students' expression instead of dismissing or ignoring them. By encouraging students to explore their inner thoughts and feelings, they learn to develop an authentic sense of self-knowledge and self-awareness. The following scenario demonstrates what happens when teachers empower students to express themselves without judging them.

Scenario II

Student: I HATE math. It's BORING!
Teacher: You sound frustrated…*(helps to identify his feeling)*
Student: I can't do the questions, they are too hard.
Teacher: Mmm… *(accepts student's expression without judging)*
Student: [Pause to think] (*allow time to reflect*)
Teacher: What do you think is the problem here? *(engages student in problem-solving)*
Student: I can't figure out what to do here…and here… *(allows time to identify area of difficulty)*
Teacher: Which step do you think is missing here? *(assists without resolving the problem for him)*
Student: I think I need to look through my notes again and maybe work with my partner to see if we can come up with a solution. *(student figured out a couple of ways to resolve the problem)*

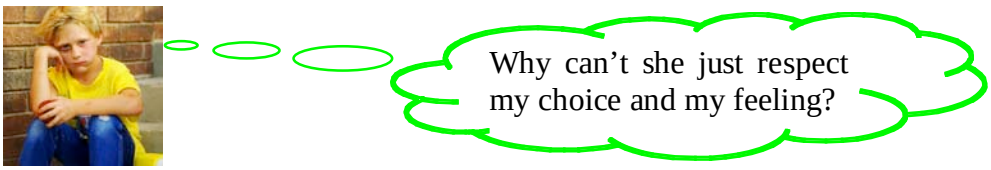
Sound like you have a couple of options to try. I'll let you decide what you prefer to do.

Feeling empowered to handle the situation

2. Do you usually expect students to come up with a rationale explanation when you ask them a question?

Scenario III

Student: I don't feel like going outside to play today.
Teacher: Why not? *(expects student to support his decision)*
Student: I don't know… *(student doesn't have a legitimate explanation)*
Teacher: What do you mean by you don't know? (*teacher will not accept student's response)*
Student: I just don't feel like it, that's all! *(frustrated at not knowing what to tell the teacher)*
Teacher: What do you mean by you don't "feel" like it? *(persuades student to come up with a rationale)*
Student: [Perplexed and frustrated] I just want to be left alone.
Teacher: Don't be rude!



Teachers may not always realize that when they throw rhetorical questions like "*Why did you do that*?" or "*Why didn't you do that?*" at students, they are compelling them to come up with a reasonable enough rationale for their behavior or feeling. Before long, students begin to develop a belief that unless they can come up with some legitimate, logical explanations, they are not *entitled* to behave or feel the way they do. This style of questioning only shuts students down rather than open them up to self-empowerment. Instead of questioning students, teachers can say:

- "*Talk to me…*" and then LISTEN;
- "*Keep talking…*" and then LISTEN;
- "*Tell me what happened…*" and then LISTEN.

Sometimes, the most effective way of empowering students is to simply acknowledge their self-expression with a nod, a sound, "Oh," or a couple of words, "I see." Take a look at the next scenario:

Scenario IV

Student: I don't feel like going outside to play today.
Teacher: Oh? *(acknowledges student's decision without prying)*
Student: I just want to stay in class.

Teacher: I see... If you change your mind and decide to go outside, you may still do so…I'll be here if you need me. (*lets student know he can adjust his preference based on his needs and the teacher is there to help*)

My teacher respects my decision and empowered me to choose.

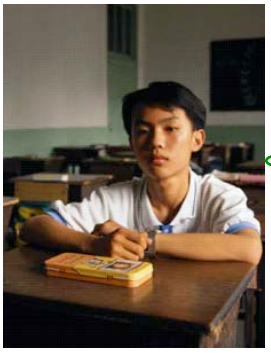
3. Do you usually tell students what to do when problems arise?

Scenario V

Teacher: Jim, where is your book?

Student: I don't know, maybe I left it at home.

Teacher: Well, you can share with Sarah today. Put a note in your folder to remind yourself to put the book in your backpack tonight. (*tells student exactly what is needed to solve the problem. Student is not expected to come up with a solution*)



Well…somehow the teacher will solve my problem for me. I'll just do what she says.

Time and again, teachers are too quick to tell students what to do when a problem arises rather than suggest alternatives or let students come up with plausible solutions to go about resolving the problem. Whether the solution was to employ negative reinforcement or deal with it in another manner such as the scenario above, students get the perception that teachers are in charge of their problems, their performance, their behavior, and hence, their lives. Consequently, students do not feel a need to be concerned about making decisions, solving problems, or regulating their behavior because regardless of what the outcome may be, teachers are responsible.

In order to create an environment where students can develop skills of self-regulation, teachers need to allow students to be in charge of (a) identifying the problem; (b) modifying their behaviors; (c) predicting outcomes; (d) negotiating and compromising conflicts; and (e) adjusting their goals.

Not all students will readily confront problematic situations, some may even resist the challenge altogether because they do not want to be responsible for possible negative outcomes. To help students understand that their choice is an expression of autonomy and dignity, teachers not only need to provide students with daily opportunities for decision making, they must also provide them with the time necessary to identify where the problem lies, generate alternatives, and take responsibility of the situation. Teachers may need to assist students by suggesting possible solutions or providing critical information about the situation, but ultimately, students must be empowered to choose, decide, and resolve their problems.

Scenario VI

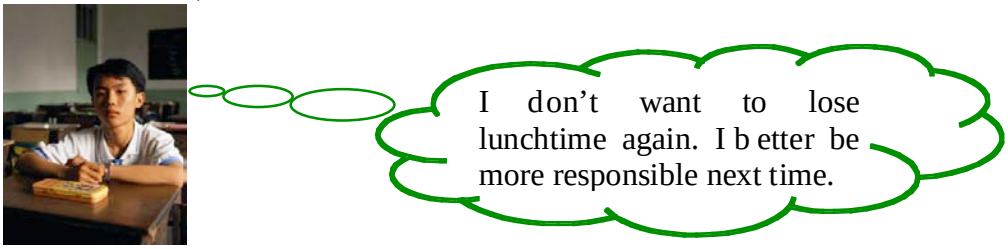
Teacher: Jim, where is your book?

Student: I don't know, maybe I left it at home.

Teacher: We need the book to complete today's assignment *(allows student time to identify the problem situation and generate alternative)*. What are you going to do? *(lets student know there is a problem and he is responsibility for resolving it)*

Student: I can ask if someone will be willing to share with me or I'll stay back during lunch to complete the work. *(allows student to come up with possible solutions)*

Teacher: You've managed to handle the situation in an acceptable this time. Next time, I expect you to remember to bring your book. (*gives credit to student for handling the situation without compromising your expectation*)



Final Words

Words can be powerful tools for engaging students with disabilities in self-determined behaviors. Instead of dismissing feelings, reprimanding students, or taking over problems, teachers can use the opportunity to help students acquire fundamental skills of self-determination. Teachers' manner of communication plays a significant role in building an atmosphere that invites students to express themselves, exercise choice making, resolve problems, monitor behavior, and take appropriate risks. Through thoughtful daily interaction, teachers can enhance students' ability to become proactive and empowered to take charge of their lives.

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