

Creating a Learning Environment That Develops Strategic Thinking

Dear Families,

The teachers in the Primary School read a book over the summer, and we are devoting time throughout the year to discussing its important ideas. Peter H. Johnston's *Choice Words, How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* emphasizes the importance of creating a learning environment through the thoughtful language we use as teachers and parents. Global words of praise, e.g. *good, bad, wonderful, poor*, aren't useful for our learners because they don't provide specific information about exactly what should be replicated or avoided. We're working on noticing and naming behaviors exactly. For instance, a teacher may say, "I'm noticing that you've paid close attention to the beginning and ending sounds of this word, so let's look at what the vowel is saying," when a child is learning to decode an unfamiliar word and making a close approximation of it. With sufficient noticing and practice, we hope that when the child comes across a new word, special attention will be paid to the vowel's placement in the word.

During our second discussion of this book on Professional Day, the teachers examined the idea of "agency". This initially means that our students must be able to realistically imagine that they can accomplish the learning task that we set before them and eventually take on the role of manager of their own learning. For example, a third grader recently took components of a chart our literacy coach had created and combined them with a learning chart her teacher had provided. This child created a personalized chart that she's using daily to monitor her understanding of her independent reading.

It's so important that we, as teachers of young children, assess each child carefully and provide a learning opportunity that's within the child's grasp. Of course, all of us must communicate to the children that learning involves noticing, trying, and sticking with something – even when it feels hard. But if children experience too much difficulty on a consistent basis, they will likely not see themselves as competent. This negatively affects their sense of identity, and they typically lose motivation and interest. When a child does what that third grade student did, there is a sense of ownership and responsibility for his/her learning. Motivation increases.

Therefore, one of our responsibilities is to make sure that our classrooms are organized and predictable. This provides a safe learning environment in which to take risks. Another very important task for the teacher is to help each child see him or herself as being in charge of their own learning. We're reminding ourselves to ask questions that help children identify their own steps in the learning process. Here are examples of some of the *choice questions* we're focusing on: What are you trying to do today in your writing/reading/math? How did you figure that out? Where was the tricky part? How do you plan to solve it? We often say show, don't tell; but the really important strategy for teachers and parents is ASK.

A 1998 study by Skinner, Zimmerman, Gembek, and Connell found that children who believe in their own abilities not only feel competent, they "plan well, choose challenging

tasks, and set higher goals” for themselves. They actually pay closer attention when they encounter a difficulty and ultimately learn more skills! These are the very traits we are endeavoring to nurture in our students.

Cordially,
Jo-An Vargo