

Words May Come Back to You When You Need Them

Murthy B M

Coordinator, Vishwa Vidyapeeth School

Abstract

The effects of teacher language and labelling on children's motivation and self-esteem. This paper uses the findings of a classroom intervention carried out in a middle school setting to illustrate how repeated negative labels issued by the teacher can be 'becoming' and internalised into the student's sense of self, thus resulting in disengagement and a fall in self-esteem. In carrying out the intervention, the 'dignity-affirming' classroom management skills of restorative questioning and belief-based language were piloted in a high-disruption classroom. The author took a reflective practitioner role, facilitating students' perceptions as written responses to their input into the process, signalling that most students had been 'becoming' their teacher's negative labels as part of their personal story. It is argued that 'becoming' is at the heart of the challenges teachers face with children who 'act out', and that teachers need to reach the child behind the behaviour and get to know that child.

Mots-clés: language de l'enseignant, concept de soi de l'élève, théorie de l'étiquetage, gestion de classe, collège, pratique restaurative, relations enseignant-élève

1. Introduction

The role of words. When a teacher speaks, especially at a higher frequency, those words can be influential in shaping the student's perception of themselves, others, and the learning environment (for example, when a teacher repeats a comment frequently). Effective pedagogical research shows that teacher expectations and words affect the student's success and perception of themselves (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Hattie, 2009). Unfortunately, the notion that negative teacher words add up to deconstructing a student's self-identity can be missed during a busy classroom routine - especially in a disruptive behaviour setting. This paper offers a reflective account of a classroom intervention carried out by the author in the role of Middle School Coordinator. The particular class discussed had been labelled as disruptive across the whole school and teachers of the subject used negative language to describe it. This paper explores the student voice - informed by a short written task - and explores what can be learned for classroom interaction, teacher training and school culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Labelling Theory and Education

In terms of resisting labels, we have drawn on the theory of the 'labelling' of deviance in society (Becker 1963). However, such labels have also been used to explain the practice of teachers labelling their pupils in education (Cicourel, 1968). In terms of self-fulfilling prophecies, a student who is told they are the worst class, difficult or disruptive could internalise this label to believe that this is an acceptable and

expected identity (Merton 1948). Such perceptions are especially powerful at teenage age as this is when 'we need to be of our peers' (Erikson 1968).

2.2 Teacher Language and Student Self-Concept

In his seminal synthesis of educational research, Hattie (2009) argues that teacher-student relationships and teacher feedback are two of the most effective strategies for raising student achievement. Building on this work, Dweck's (2006) research on growth mind set provides further evidence that the language that teachers use – especially the difference between fixed and growth-minded communication – can have a real impact on student motivation and resilience. Teachers who communicate high expectations and belief in the capacity of the students to improve will see higher levels of academic engagement and perseverance in their students (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

2.3 Dignity and Restorative Approaches in Schools

Restorative models of behaviour management in education prioritise repair of relationships, student voice and dignity (Hopkins, 2004; Zehr, 2002). They sit in stark contrast to a deficit model that sees behaviour correction as the issue, not behaviour (Zogmal, 2003), and evidence suggests restorative approaches can have a positive impact on exclusions, school climate and teacher-student relationships (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). This is aligned with the argument of this paper that addressing causation is often more significant than addressing the actual behaviour.

3. Methodology

This paper is written using a reflective practitioner approach (Schn, 1983), where I integrated a small lesson with students and my own qualitative analysis of their texts. The author is a teacher and coordinator of the middle school section of Vishwa Vidyapeeth School who has worked professionally with the class in question.

When a usual class began, the teacher paused the lesson and requested all students to write anonymously about two questions: (1) how they felt about the class, and (2) how they felt about the teachers' talking to them. No direction or possible response was offered. All student responses were gathered, read, and analysed for common language, affect, and explicit individual requests. Students were told responses would be read only by the teacher and that student writing would not impact grades.

4. Findings

4.1 Internalisation of Negative Labels

The most pervasive piece of data was the nearly universal way in which students echoed teacher language in their own descriptions of themselves. Students would write something very similar to the following: "Every teacher says we are the worst class they have ever seen." While at first glance it seems as though the students are using this phrase as a way to insult teachers, it indicates how language is passed from one to another.

4.2 Declining Self-Esteem and Disengagement

The students described themselves as inferior to the other classes, and had the opinion that teachers had already judged them to be "bad" students. Multiple students stated that there was no point in trying to improve because they felt that the teacher's label of them as students was set. Such as in the study by

Seligman (1975), Diener and Dweck (1978), learned helplessness occurs in school students who are given repeated negative feedback, and stop believing that putting effort forth has positive results.

4.3 Student Requests for Dignity and Belief

Do you want less? Want less work? Less rules?

Students' requests, on the other hand, were remarkably uncomplex.

Some common student requests were: to be "treated with respect," to be "not yelled at for no reason," to be "pushed," to be "told they could do it," and for "teachers to believe they could do better." These student requests imply that these students did not hate school or rules; rather, they wanted more dignity from their teachers.

5. Discussion

What the outcomes of this intervention mean, however, is that it has problematic implications for everyday classroom routines used throughout school. The practice of collectively describing a class of students as 'the worst' does not merely describe a group of students in relation to their behaviours at a given time - it also constructs a group of students through a value judgment of their ability. This judgment, in the long term, can diminish an individual student's motivation and self-belief to learn, even where he or she may well have the ability.

Discipline and accountability are a necessary element of good schooling. That discipline can only be effective if students feel they are treated with dignity. From the evidence in the current case, it appears that the disruptive behaviour in the classroom may have been partly reinforced – and possibly escalated – by the teacher's lack of belief and the negative shaming language which was being used. Using more collaborative, trusting language ('I know you can do better', 'let's work together to improve this') might change the relationship and reduce the disruptive behaviour.

The above discussion also serves as a reminder of the necessity of the student voice as a form of diagnosis. Instead of persistently reacting to surface behaviour, the author decided to halt and offer to demonstrate the emotions and perspectives hidden within, a decision that falls in line with restorative inquiry, as 'what happened and how did it affect you?' is typically a more useful question than 'what's wrong with you?'

6. Implications for Practice

- Schools should incorporate training on the psychological impact of teacher language into professional development programmes, particularly for teachers working with high-disruption classrooms.
- Middle school coordinators and school leaders can implement regular student feedback mechanisms that allow students to express their perceptions of classroom interactions in a safe and anonymous way.
- Classroom management frameworks should explicitly include dignity as a core principle, alongside discipline and accountability.
- Teachers working with challenging classes should be encouraged to adopt belief-based language — communicating that change is possible and that the teacher is invested in that change.

- Peer teacher discussions about 'difficult' classes should be facilitated by school leadership, with the aim of moving from deficit-based descriptions of students to problem-solving, strength-focused conversations.

7. Conclusion

A teacher's words travel far beyond the moment of utterance. In a classroom where students are repeatedly told they are 'the worst', those words do not merely describe — they prescribe. They become the lens through which students view themselves and the expectations they carry into every lesson. This paper has documented one instance of this pattern and argued that the solution lies not in removing discipline, but in combining it with dignity, belief, and the willingness to listen.

A difficult class does not always need a harsher response. Sometimes, it needs a teacher willing to ask why — and to believe the answer is changeable. Future research should explore structured interventions based on dignity-affirming language in middle school classrooms and measure their impact on behaviour, attendance, and academic outcomes over time.

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