

The Use of Language and Respect for Educational Success

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THE POWER OF LANGUAGE:

People use language often without thought as to what message we are sending or expressing to others. The use of language within education, verbal language and body language, can be consciously used to develop trust, respect and a healthy working relationship between teachers, administrators and students. This power of language is a common theme throughout the books by Ronald Takaki, Christopher Dunbar and Julie Landsman.

Our students may tell us a great deal about their thoughts and feelings simply by what we observe in the way they sit, stand, or gesture. We can know how they are progressing in their education if we are willing to learn to read body language through their actions, or in some cases, their inaction within the classroom. As Dunbar observes in the beginning of *Alternative Schooling for African-American Youths*, "Students are combative toward each other; most don't know each other and they sit in front of you with a disgruntled look on their faces that says, I'd rather be somewhere else." (Dunbar, prologue) This observation of Dunbar is an excellent example of interpretation of body language, and it is important that teachers pay attention and interpret its meaning, not only to set the educational tone of the classroom, but also as a means to develop individualized curriculum, as in what are these students missing? What do I need to garner their interest? In addition, teachers must be cognizant of their own body language and how it is expressed toward their students. Dunbar gives another excellent example when he wrote, "Black teachers simply had a way of looking at you that said without actually saying a word 'You know that I know you know better.' It was subliminal communication!" (Dunbar, pg 102)

Effective communication requires a learned skill, as a teacher may be speaking what they believe is benign language, but if their facial expression, hand gestures or posture does not mirror this language, students may receive a message completely opposed to the words they hear. On the website,

eHow, Jessica Saras writes, “Studies indicate that people communicate more effectively through body language than through actual words,” (Saras, 1999-2011)

Landsman makes many references to use and observation of body language throughout *A White teacher Talks About Race* and applies her skill to guide her teaching curriculum, her attitude and her responses, or lack of responses as she did with Matthew, the college student, her nemesis, “I am loading everything into my briefcase. My body language says clearly I have to get going.” (Landsman, pg 125) The ability to read and interpret body language is a skill that should be a core component of teacher education. Landsman uses this skill well, and clearly understands the implications when she recounts her despair at the educational silence of black history, “On those mornings when I see a young black girl surreptitiously rub her hand along the pictures of black women in the book ‘To Dream a World’, I wonder: Is it asking too much to include them all?” (Landsman, pg 40) This was a poignant moment emphasizing the need of understanding of what is missing in our most *at-risk* student’s lives and education by paying attention to a simple hand gesture. By using this newfound knowledge of what is missing a creative teacher must be allowed to restructure the class curriculum to fulfill that unmet need.

Although it is important to use knowledge gained from observation of body language in order to teach skills students need most, it is also important to use this skill to know when to let go, opposite of Matthew, the angry teacher in training, and never make assumptions on your observations as Landsman writes, “We do this all the time. We see a kid who has a certain look: baggy pants, long shirts, high tops, bandanna, and we decide exactly how he or she will behave.” (Landsman, pg 104) At issue with making assumptions is that if we are wrong then we may be short-changing a student by failing to pursue the best educational path for their intellectual abilities and doing so simply by our observations of body language.

In comparison to Dunbar and Landsman, Takaki references the power of language throughout *A Different Mirror* in episodes of his personal historical narrative as he writes about his encounter with an unenlightened taxi driver that made assumptions of Takaki's citizenship status, and ability to speak English well, solely based on his facial features and body language. However, there is a great deal of contrast between Takaki and our other two authors in that while Dunbar and Landsman recount the power of language through personal observations and experiences, Takaki mostly refers to the power of language as a 3rd party to historical persons and events as a means of denigrating and subjugating minorities in America and as an analogy of American society. Takaki often references the subjugation of Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, using this poetic language as an effective metaphor for America's black population.

An additional contrast is student's use of language expressed in Dunbar and Landsman as consciously created street language implying their student's desire to maintain cultural identity separate from mainstream America. While in Takaki, an immigrant's native language becomes an undesired barrier separating them from mainstream America. Both street language and native language are powerful tools in maintaining cultural identity, but it also does not allow an easy path toward education and prosperity unless you are willing to speak two languages, cultural language within your home and community, and a more formal second language within the general population. Once we learn to use the power of language in speech, body and observation, our educational possibilities as administrators can increase student participation and expectations significantly.

Respect:

The ideal of respect, or lack of respect, is prevalent within the works of Landsman, Dunbar and Takaki. In many instances it is voiced by name, but just as importantly it becomes an underlying theme

within the concepts of discussion, thought and action of teachers, observers and students, as well as underlying causes of discrimination recounted by Takaki.

What we learn in Landsman and Dunbar's books is the attitudes of students, toward school in general, and teachers specifically, are grounded on disrespect, both given and received. In Takaki, disrespect is mostly implied throughout history in the attitudes and behaviors of the white majority toward minorities in the United States. Respect is an action or language we all need in order to maintain self-esteem. Developing respect in the classroom, according to Landsman, generates attentiveness, animates students toward a given subject, and a clearer focus on their own education.

Respect and self-esteem are interchangeable labels. Students born and raised in the lower echelons of the socio-economic ladder were more often than not treated with disrespect outside of their cultural community, as though as children they were somehow responsible for the poverty in which they were born. This lack of respect can have a profound influence on how they view themselves as they mature and their ability to succeed in life because they were unable to develop a level of self-esteem that would allow that success. Landsman wonders, "Have we, as white educators, assumed certain things about the futures of students of color, and have we unconsciously communicated lower expectations to them?" (Landsman, pg 45) The answer to her question is a resounding yes we have, but generally toward those lacking the self-esteem to know they are capable of success and unable to find their voice in demanding the full educational opportunities in which they are entitled.

Although Landsman's students are vocal in their thoughts, and their actions can be construed as disruptive, it is clear she has developed and shows respect for them and they for her, so that even when they complain about the work most still come back to school the next day. That is what is most important. As Christopher Dunbar states in his section titled The Dilemma: Slap or Be Slapped! "We're

all human. We don't want to come to a job every day and be disrespected by our students." (Dunbar, pg 79) Children learn to understand respect and disrespect at a very young age, either in the home, the community or in school. They are perceptive and if given the respect they deserve then it is more than likely they will develop the self-esteem needed to return respect in kind. Dunbar writes a great deal about lack of discipline and the inappropriate language and behavior he observes of students, also addressed often by Landsman. But, it is also noted that respect requires setting limits of behavior, creating structure and letting students know how much you care about them by making them responsible for their behavior and their own learning.

It is not difficult to find cultural disrespect throughout Takaki's narration of events and people in US history. If you delve deep enough into the history of people that promote segregation of race you will most likely find people that are themselves insecure within their place in society. Their own lack of self-esteem manifests in the subjugation of minorities to secure a position of power and privilege they cannot earn on their own as Takaki noted with Irish immigrants, "A powerful way to transform their own identity from 'Irish' to 'American' was to attack blacks. Thus, blacks as the 'other' served to facilitate their assimilation." (Takaki, pg 143)

All Americans understand we are a multi-cultural society, but we have yet to find a balance between our society today and where we wish to be in the future. Our future lies in education. But, it must be equality of education for all levels of economic status. Two very important components of education is the power of language to teach, to learn, to succeed and respect for our differing cultures, ideals and our children.

Works Cited

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