**Mind Your Language**

As a straight talking pragmatist, I eschew Newspeak and pretentious language. We need to communicate as much as we can and as easily as we can in the interests of children. However, I am also a lifelong advocate for students whose behaviour can be challenging both for themselves and for others around them. And therefore I find myself needing to insist on a lexicon which promotes their dignity and in doing so nurtures an internal narrative reinforcing the values and understanding we have developed as a profession around emotional and behavioural needs. This means finding the sweet spot between tact and tenacity in pursuing this with other adults - in order to avoid validating what we tolerate.

It’s a real disappointment that SEMH seems to lag behind Learning Difficulties in terms of the sensitivity to unfortunate and unhelpful language. We can all call to mind terms such as ‘remedial’, ‘simple’ - and far worse - which quite rightly cause sharp intakes of breath in any polite circle. And yet, I still regularly hear terminology from colleagues and partner professionals in relation to behaviour which makes me feel uncomfortable. Even from those I would consider both well-intentioned and well informed

**How can we encourage colleagues to reflect on their lexicon without creating barriers to collaborative working?**

In considering this issue, I am reminded of the Choristers’ Prayer “Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our lives”. In other words, carefully considered language bears out what we think and feel. But equally and in turn provides the frame of reference for our responses and attitudes and therefore influences our behaviour. The power of language for good or ill is abundantly acknowledged and understood in this day and age. Both printed matter and the internet are awash with material elucidating the importance of self-talk, neuro-linguistic programming, shared lexicon and suchlike.

Why, then, is it still acceptable to describe a distressed child as “kicking-off”? On behalf of my students and their families I find this term deeply offensive. Outlawing it was a first and powerful step in embracing the communicable intent in the behaviours of students at my school, refocusing on what lies beneath, rather than the mere tip of the iceberg. I’ll leave you to decide what sort of people *do* “kick off”. Certainly not traumatised, frustrated, anxious children crying out to us about their unmet need. Using a term like this is carelessly pejorative and dismissive, as far as I am concerned. And above all, lays the blame squarely at the feet of the young person, leaving the adult as a judging observer rather than an empathetic companion.

**How can we use language to show our students that we are with them and share the task of recovering their equilibrium?**

I am certain that most professionals we encounter will these days have evolved from using attention *seeking* (again, implied criticism, as if this is something the child shouldn’t be receiving) to attention *needing* (legitimising the child’s request to adults to provide that which they feel the lack of). But what about the frequently seen ‘planned ignoring’? Is it ever acceptable to *ignore* a child trying to get a need met through their behaviour? Working to the dictionary definition as *refuse to take notice of or acknowledge; disregard intentionally,* what does this say about how important their distress, or anxiety or fear is to you? This is not to say that deciding not to respond to certain behaviours can never be right thing to do. It’s an important strategy in our repertoire. But the significance of exactly how we describe its application it is self-evident.

**How can we use language to promote the values and culture of a community?**

Really thinking about language and lexicon as a community takes time and trust. It’s a shared vulnerability to admit “We’ve been using that phrase but now we think about it, it’s not really OK and we’re not going to do it anymore.” And holding each other to that commitment. At my school, we tend to think even more forensically as a team about the things we say and what we mean when new colleagues join us. It is so easy to know what *you* think and feel in your head but to belie this with a careless or colloquial lexicon. It is so important in inducting people quickly to the values and culture around behaviour by being consistent and precise in the way we talk about students and therefore how we all come to see them and experience them.

At my school recently, we reconsidered the term ‘honeymoon period’. We challenged ourselves and realised that there can be a startlingly negative connotation to this phraseology. It can imply that children are somehow choosing to be good… until the novelty wears off? until you see their ‘true colours’? in order to mislead adults?.... We’ve worked hard on reframing for ourselves the negative behaviours that we sometimes see when children start to trust us and start to feel safe with us. So, instead of that sense of somehow finally seeing how difficult they can be, we’ve learned to acknowledge as an important and powerful moment, and something of a compliment to us, when a child finally feels able to take the risk of us seeing them not being the best version of themselves. We embrace this as evidence that, inherently, they want us to know them and to be alongside them in their distress instead of being alone inside themselves with their most painful thoughts and feelings.

Adult anxiety is an understandable reaction to dysregulated behaviour in students. Language has a powerful role in ameliorating this and enabling them to stay the course with students emotionally at their lowest times. A colleague from another school recently shared an expression they use to describe that small group of students in every school who together take up the greatest amount of time and energy. It is ‘the celebrities’. I shared this with my team and they adopted it with enthusiasm, appreciating the warmth and humour it lent to reframing our more demanding characters and their impact on the community. It has already paid dividends, not merely in the wider sense of acceptance that every community will have their ‘celebrities’ with the particular conditions which need to be met in order for them to thrive. It has also provided a host of opportunities for gentle humour and diffusion, much of which centres around the absolute privilege of working with our most colourful characters. Thankfully, none of the key workers to date has asked me to “get me out of here”. With or without their celebrity. And if that’s not the power of positive language, I don’t know what is!

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