

Introduction

Does our everyday use of language make a difference in the culture of schools, communities, workplaces, and society in general? The answer is, “Yes, yes, and yes!” This book addresses this issue and stresses how to use language to engender equity and social justice. The other question this book engages is, How does our use of language affect our understandings and the way we act? Through a series of vignettes and concrete examples, we show the complexity of the relationship between our speech and its impact on human organizations (e.g., schools)—speech that acts to reproduce present inequities and speech that is transforming.

WHY? THE SAME OLD PROBLEM

We wrote this book because, while there have already been volumes—whole libraries, in fact—written on the subject of school reform, one area remains relatively unexamined: the role of everyday language in the transformation of school culture.

For decades now, educators have been trying to make public schools in the United States truly embody democratic ideals. Fundamental to these ideals is the notion that schools should afford equitable and just access and outcomes to learning for all students; in other words, schooling should not reinforce or worsen existing inequities in our society based on ethnicity/race, class, gender, or other social dimensions. Countless well-intended efforts have not successfully transformed public education into an equitable and just system throughout the country. Where pockets of success exist, it has been difficult to replicate and spread the good news to other schools in other contexts.

Is there something reformers have been missing? A new reform strategy perhaps? A “silver bullet”? A new package designed to deliver better instruction, better curriculum, better assessment, better learning? Better leadership?

Recent research tells us that if there is any such thing, it will probably cost taxpayers and local communities bundles for new textbooks, new testing mechanisms, new technologies, and new staffing needs. Most educators have a “soft spot” for students, and anything that can be sold to us as doing a better job of educating them is immediately appealing. This book does not present a school reform package or any new and glitzy twist on instruction. Rather, we ask readers to reevaluate the power of the language they use on a daily basis in their work as educators and to consider a humble, no-tech, and yet extremely powerful intervention: changing our language to become more consistent in expressing our beliefs about equitable and socially just education.

WHAT? THE BOOK’S PURPOSE

This book is designed to help educators of all kinds become more skillful change agents by using language effectively as a tool for change. If we change our language we will probably also change what and how we think as well as what we do!

The changes involved require no new financial investment—only your time, your understanding, and the collective will to make them happen. We are not suggesting that language change alone can accomplish all that needs to be done to make schooling better. What we are saying is that language change is like a booster or amplifier (and sometimes the catalyst) that can assist educators in making the most of a concerted, coherent reform effort. Language is a largely unnoticed and unacknowledged tool that we are not yet using effectively. Changing the way we talk costs us no extra money yet has the potential to be extremely powerful in maximizing the changes we seek.

Edmundo Norte, one of the educators whose work we discuss in greater detail later on, says this about language:

It’s pretty central. It’s a key tool for trying to make change . . . because language reflects the way we frame and think about the world. One of the things I’m really explicit about in diversity trainings is not using language

that represents the world as bipolar—either-or, good or bad, and how . . . language represents a way of conceptualizing and framing the world. . . . We participate in our own oppression by using language that supports a way of framing the world that is inherently going to lead to inequity—“There are going to be those that are smart and those that are dumb.” So if you’ve got that basic framing down, then it becomes very easy for those who have the power—those who view themselves as right, or moral, to say they have the correct perspective and others don’t. In the training I do, I’m very explicit about that.

When asked how people in the trainings react, he responded:

It’s one of the more powerful things, even though it’s a stretch. People can recognize it in themselves—“Oh yeah, I do that.” So I think people can connect both with how they do use it, and also make the link to seeing how it’s not consistent with other values they express. So for example when I’m doing a training with teachers, I’ll ask them, “What brought you into teaching? What was the vision that you had?” And when they name the different things, [they see that] . . . if we’re still thinking about the world in terms of either-or, right-wrong, good-bad, even if it’s about the oppressor or the person in power, we’re still buying into that system.

Educational leaders, teachers, and other school practitioners use language every day in a variety of social transactions: addressing conflicts, negotiating union contracts, developing a unified vision, contesting injustices, and so on. In each case the language used will either promote social justice or reproduce inequities. In terms of social actions, words and language are perhaps the most powerful force, as they are the primary means by which shared understandings are developed.

Language is largely taken for granted. We do not normally think about every word we say before we say it. Likewise, we do not carefully examine every word that is said to us. Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn once wrote, “It would hardly be the fish who would discover the existence of water.”¹ This metaphor was originally used to describe the taken-for-granted nature of culture; it also easily applies to language. It is all around us, but for the most part, we do not have to think about it; we just use it. We even end up believing many of the assumptions and expectations conveyed implicitly through language, a fact that advertisers and politicians use to their advantage regularly.

Why not take hold of this amazing medium we use every day and put it to work in the service of creating a world that is more equitable and socially just?

HOW? ACHIEVING THE PURPOSE

As previously stated, our central purpose in writing this book is to help educators become more effective change agents in their quest to develop equitable and socially just schools. How do we plan to achieve this purpose? We do so by applying some of the analytical and creative skills of *critical discourse analysis* to everyday talk. We will explain this more fully in Chapter 1, but for now, suffice it to say that these skills involve becoming more aware of how language influences our beliefs and assumptions and also becoming knowledgeable about how we can use language to improve life circumstances in and out of schools.

Critical discourse analysis has been absent from the curriculum in most teacher preparation and educational leadership preparation programs. This approach is something quite different from political correctness. Most people are familiar with political correctness as a form of language change, but it has become merely symbolic to many people. Phrases such as “sanitation engineer” in place of “janitor” or “differently abled” in place of “handicapped” may show that one is a certain kind of person (e.g., liberal, progressive). A politically correct identity can also be used to put someone down as in “you’re just being politically correct,” or “I hate all that PC talk.” Distancing oneself from the “PC” talkers signals an opposite identity as a “straight talker,” someone who “tells it like it is,” is “down to earth,” and doesn’t put “window dressings on the facts.”

Norman Fairclough, in “‘Political Correctness’: The Politics of Culture and Language”² points out that while it is liberals who have been labeled as PC, they are not the only ones who use relabeling and other language choices to help change perceptions and practices. In fact, marketing specialists use this tactic regularly when they relabel “bank accounts” as “financial products.” So do politicians, when they relabel “learning” as “educational outcomes.”

Transformations in language occur because we as individuals somehow come to consensus of what is wrong with language. When this social consensus converges with larger movements, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, then noticeable changes

take place. One of the greatest successes has been in the area of gendered language. It is far more common in public discourse these days to hear *chair* or *chairperson* than the older form, *chairman*. And women have indeed taken their places in many of the leadership roles these terms express. But other changes have been far more superficial. What are some of the reasons for these rather limited effects?

For one thing, PC language has not always been interconnected with other actions, such as wage equity. Secondly, in many cases, people's beliefs and attitudes have not changed; they have merely adopted new or fashionable terms. Third, some efforts to spread PC language have been too "top down"; people do not appreciate having language changes forced on them by those in higher positions. In this regard, Fairclough points out that market strategists and politicians have actually been more successful at their language change efforts because they have not waged an overt campaign but rather used the implicit nature of culture and language to insert their changes. They haven't called attention to their language substitutions. And fourth, most of PC's focus has been on labels—nouns, noun phrases, and pronouns. PC language primarily affects the reference system of the language—the terms we use to talk about people. It hasn't done much to change the verbs or larger language structures we use.

So how does the approach we take in this book differ from PC language? First of all, we make connections across three dimensions: what people actually say, write, or sign; the context in which those words are used (e.g., to whom and in what setting the words are spoken); and the way those words connect to a larger belief system. By connecting these three dimensions to one another, we move beyond the superficial use of different words or labels.

Second, we believe that a coaching model is more appropriate to the goals of language change for equity than a top-down, monitoring model. We don't want to create a "language police force," and the best way to avoid this is to make language change an object of inquiry and cultural shift, not a forced hyperawareness that creates fear, shame, and inhibition, all of which act to shut down communication.

Third, we believe that while it is useful to look at the reference system (nouns, noun phrases, and pronouns) we use in our everyday language, it is also useful to look at other structures in our everyday language—for instance, the way we use metaphors, the ways in which we categorize people and activities, the verbs we use to express different activities, and the relative value or importance of the people and

activities thus categorized. In sum, there are many aspects of language that we need to look at if we want to get a picture of how ideas about equity and social justice are encoded in language.

WHAT WILL YOU GET OUT OF THIS BOOK?

At a minimum, readers should take away the following enhancements in their repertoires as change agents:

1. An enhanced ability to recognize language that perpetuates or reinforces social inequities
2. An enhanced ability to use the power of language to interrupt cultural practices that perpetuate inequities
3. An enhanced ability to creatively seek and practice alternative language that more closely reflects equitable educational ideals
4. An enhanced ability to lead others in the practice of critical language awareness and transformative language use

In the next section we introduce ourselves and the experiences that have helped to develop our interest in social justice and language.

MORE ABOUT THE AUTHORS

What we do and who we are profoundly impacts our understanding of the world, which in turn influences our behaviors. Intellectual honesty plays a pivotal role in our work as researchers and as scholars. Thus, we write this note in order to disclose our lives as they intersect with this book's topic. Below, we have each written a brief description of our positionings in society as well as about some of the data sources from which we draw our illustrations in this book.³

Felecia Briscoe

I am an associate professor in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas. Although my ethnicity is quite mixed, European American (Irish) predominates

and thus my appearance and experiences are largely that of a European American woman. I grew up on a family farm the third of eleven children in a very poor working-class family on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Nevada. I graduated high school as valedictorian, firmly believing that public education offered the only trustworthy path out of poverty. I married at the age of eighteen. Six years later, with three children, all under the age of five, I got divorced. At that time I had less than two years of college.

I then worked and completed a bachelor's degree in K–8 education with a science emphasis and a masters degree in psychology with an emphasis in experimental cognitive psychology. I spent the next four years as a teacher in the public schools as a middle school science teacher. After that I moved to Cincinnati and earned my doctorate in education with an emphasis in social foundations.

Three types of experiences have influenced me to become an advocate for social justice, especially in education. First, my experiences as a working-class woman, single with three children, working her way through college and graduate school helped me to understand that the academic playing field was indeed stacked against the working and poverty classes.

Second, as I began to associate with more middle-class people in graduate school I came to understand that their public school (and private school) experiences were *very* different from mine and that they had been much better prepared for selecting and attending college. These middle-class people know about things like the Merit Scholarships that were completely out of the purview of my teachers and my family when I was growing up. I understood therefore that U.S. public schools were not providing equal distributions of knowledge and educational opportunities for all children.

My third experience was as a public school science teacher. While I was teaching, the district decided that children hitherto classified as special education were to be mainstreamed as much as possible into classes. The effect was that five African American boys suddenly appeared in my seventh-grade science classes. From my interactions with these children, I could not see any indication that they suffered from any sort of mental deficit. I was upset by the fact that because they had spent years in special education, their reading skills were marginal at best. I went to the principal and asked how I was to give the boys a fair chance to succeed in my science class and at the same time to uphold high standards of learning.

The principal threw up his hands helplessly and said, “Do the best that you can.”

I was horrified! I was being forced to be complicit in setting up these boys for failure. I would either have to fudge their grades saying that they had learned seventh grade science sufficiently to earn a passing grade, when in fact they had not and were not prepared for success at the next level of science; or I would have to fail them according to the standards that I had set up for the rest of the class. By the end of the semester, the boys could read much better than they could when they started, but their science learning was still considerably below average.

The fact that all the children who were mainstreamed into my class were African American boys made it vividly real to me that racism was not only alive, but that it had in fact been institutionalized. This teaching experience coupled with my experiences as a student and parent convinced me that our system of schooling did *not* operate in the best interests of all students. Since that time, I have been committed to gaining the understanding necessary to change our schooling system into a more just one.

The illustrations I use in this book were taken from many different sources. However, the majority comes from interviews with twenty-two educational leaders, conducted during the years 2005–2007 in a very large metropolitan city in Texas. The interviews were structured around six questions that addressed their perceptions of the strengths and weakness of our current schooling practices.⁴ (Chapter 5 gives more details on this research.)

Gilberto Arriaza

I was born and raised in Guatemala. In 1982, I became part of the Central American Diaspora: For the first time in recent history, Central Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras were forced out of the region as a result of a war between the dictatorial regimes of those days and the organized people. I was then, as I am now, an educator deeply committed to advancing social justice.

In a sense, this book captures issues that I—literally and symbolically—live with on a daily basis. My life experience in my new, adoptive country has been deeply transforming. Upon arrival, I was immediately labeled in terms of culture, phenotype, and language, which translates as Latino, brown, second-language speaker.

The options for me, then, were to be colonized by these labels or adopt these labels as sources of power. I took the latter option.

In 1982, I didn't speak English or understand the culture. I couldn't validate my formal education either. So I had to work from scratch: I went to a local community college to learn both the language and the education traditions of the United States. I later graduated from a state university with a BA first and a MA and teaching credentials later on, and I wound up completing a PhD at the University of California at Berkeley.

Today, I clearly know and understand the multiple ramifications of the cultural, racial, and linguistic descriptors that have been applied to me. They anchor my professional commitments in a way I truly doubt would have been possible in Guatemala. As M. M. Bakhtin has explained in his book, *The Dialogic Imagination*—in order to understand, I had to leave, so that I could see from a distance the place I had been. I practice this as often as I can afford to so as to “see” the United States, especially California.

Over the past four years, I followed a team of educators who had taken some courses from me when I taught at San José State University. To avoid conflict of interest and reduce bias, I conducted a study after they had graduated from the university. This study included a focus group from a population of twenty-seven educators. Other methodological details can be found in the text of this book.

Rosemary Henze

I grew up in Southern California in a situation that was clearly privileged compared to my two coauthors. One could say that my life so far has in large part been shaped by my slow journey of intentional downward mobility followed by an upswing again through education. My father immigrated to the United States from Austria at the age of thirty, and my mother was the daughter of a wealthy Chicago family, with mainly Danish and English ancestry.

I attended private schools through high school and was largely unaware of how privileged I was. My biggest awakening to issues of social justice happened after I finished my BA in art (from UC Santa Cruz) and went to work in a retail and wholesale art supply store in San Francisco. Working in the warehouse with men of diverse backgrounds who belonged to the Teamsters Union, I started to understand how prejudice and racism work. These were the very

men I would have been frightened of before because of their “tough” looks and behaviors—and yet, through many conversations, I developed not only respect but also friendships with them. Through constant questioning and self reflection, I gradually revised my stereotypes of working-class, Black, Latino, and White males.

In my late twenties, I moved toward education as a career path, first getting a master’s degree in teaching English as a second language, and then after a few years of teaching ESL, going for my doctorate in education at Stanford University. It was at this time that I encountered social inequality as an intellectual area of study for the first time, enabling me to attach theories to what I had seen and experienced in my earlier jobs.

After I finished my doctorate, I worked for fourteen years in a nonprofit organization in Oakland, California, collaborating with schools to improve services in the area of bilingual and antiracist programs. I learned skills of project leadership, budget management, and grant writing, but most of all I learned how hard teachers work. Yet I also remember how demoralized and invisible I felt when people at academic conferences would look past my nametag with its nonacademic affiliation, quickly moving on to find someone more important to talk to. I was keenly aware that in the hierarchy of academia, where I was at the lower end of the social strata because I did not work in a university or even a two- or four-year college; the work I did in schools was seen as “practical” and “applied”—terms which in that context connote lower prestige.

Yet despite this and other experiences of feeling ignored or trivialized, there is no doubt that being a white woman raised in privileged circumstances has given me advantages many of my friends and colleagues have never had. Rather than feeling guilty and disabled about this, I have tried to turn my advantages into action by teaching, and by serving as a mentor to two girls through Big Brothers and Big Sisters. They have provided me with more lessons on the deep scars left by poverty, racism, sexism, and drug abuse. In these relationships, I struggle as all parents do with how to set boundaries in ways that will enable them to grow and flourish.

In constructing the examples for this book, I drew on a large database of interviews and observations with educators in twenty-one U.S. schools that were part of the “Leading for Diversity” research project, completed between 1996 and 1999.⁵ Second, in 2007 I conducted interviews and observations specifically for this

book with several educators in the Bay Area. In the book, you will find excerpts from three of these individuals: One is a director of curriculum and professional development for two charter schools; another is a director of a cross-cultural center on a college campus; and the third is a high school teacher-leader.

AVOIDING THE MASTER’S LANGUAGE TOOLS

As we wrote this book, we frequently talked about our own discourse. We critiqued our writing to try to make sure that we did not inadvertently use language that promoted inequities. One of the issues we struggled with was how to describe the various social groups that we discuss in this book. We decided that if we knew how people referred to themselves, we should use that category for that person. We also decided that when possible, we would try to avoid terms of color (which promote a biological understanding of differences) but instead use terms of ethnicity. Ethnicity is a more specific social category that avoids reinforcing the scientifically invalid notion of separate, biologically-different “races.”⁶ Also, if we quoted from a study, we used the same terms as those used in the study.

Our early struggles over chapter titles provide another illustration of how we interrogated our own use of language and tried to guard against the tendency to replicate what we hoped to change. Our initial chapter titles were one-word constructions such as “Othering,” “Disappearing,” and “Stratifying.” While we liked the simplicity of these titles, we began to question whether they really communicated our intent, which was to not only enhance readers’ awareness of what NOT to do but also to suggest alternatives—to use, in Paolo Friere’s translated words, a “language of possibility” and to emphasize transformation. Thus, we eventually came to the resolution you see in most of our present chapter titles—an emphasis on positive, alternative practices.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

For those who are interested in a specific topic or want to see the way the book unfolds we provide a brief overview of each of the chapters.

Chapter 1: “The Power of Language: A Medium for Promoting Social Justice and Equity” lays the groundwork. Most of the major concepts used throughout the book are introduced and explained here.

Chapter 2: “Becoming Effective in Using Critical Language Awareness” describes habits and strategies that will help change agents work with others.

Chapter 3: “Avoiding Othering: Practicing Inclusion” defines and presents examples of “othering” language. In it we explain how all too often, othering polarizes discussions and creates in- and out-groups.

Chapter 4: “Disrupting Prejudice: A Communicative Approach” proposes language skills and strategies for moving away from the dehumanizing focus on data, numbers, and percentages of whole groups at the expense of the individual.

Chapter 5: “Exceptionalizing or Democratizing?” provides examples of exceptionalizing language and how to recognize it. It also provides suggestions for avoiding exceptionalizing and developing discourses of equity.

Chapter 6: “Recognizing and Revising Stratifying Discourse” suggests language patterns that move away from reproducing hierarchies and toward more egalitarian ways of understanding ourselves and others.

Chapter 7: “Contesting Deficit Labels” offers a set of communication skills for redressing the impact of labeling. These communication skills are crafted so as to invite others to think about the way they talk, rather than to blame or shame others.

Chapter 8: “Conclusion: The Power of Talk” brings together all themes, concepts, and skills, summing up the book, suggesting ways in which this knowledge could be used, and presenting some final thoughts about why we believe this book to be an important topic for both schools and society.

WHERE AND WHEN MIGHT THE BOOK BE USED?

In addition to individual reading, we hope that this book may be used in a variety of group settings. For example, a group of people at your

school or higher education institution could read it together, do the activities and hold discussions after each chapter.

In higher education, the book could be part of the curriculum in a teacher education or leadership preparation program—either as a separate course or as part of a course that deals with leadership and change, equity, social justice, multicultural education, or other related themes. It could also be used in college and university courses that deal with critical thinking, communication, linguistics, and any of the behavioral sciences including anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Many sections of the book could also be used for high school students in a language class such as English, journalism, or critical thinking. Consultants who do diversity and communication training in schools and businesses might also find this book useful because a large part of what they do is assist people in communicating more effectively in their workplace.

NOTES

1. Kluckhohn, C. (1959). *Mirror for man*, p. 16.
2. Fairclough, N. (2003).
3. We three met at a panel discussion at the American Anthropological Association Conference in Chicago in 2003.
4. The educational leaders who participated included: a Black American (this is how the participant described himself), eight Latinas/os, and thirteen Euro-Americans. The thirteen women and nine men who participated ranged between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five. Eleven of these interviews were with educational leaders who worked in the three highest income school districts of the city and eleven of them were from three lowest income school districts.
5. Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, and Walker (2002).
6. Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses (2007).