Opening Minds:
Using language to change lives
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The following is a guide to the key points in my talk. These points and all transcripts and some cartoons are in my book *Opening Minds: Using language to change lives*. Much of my talk expanded on Vygotsky's (1978) observation that "Children grow into the intellectual life around them" and his observation that cognitive growth is "more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others as well as to oneself; striving for an explanation, often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways." I also promoted the idea of what it means to take seriously children's thinking together and the idea that the adult is not the only teacher in the classroom.

I pointed out that events happen in the classroom, but students don't know what they mean until teachers put a layer of language over the top – as Michael Halliday puts it, "Language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge."

The examples of teacher talk I used contained the threads that serve the following fundamental human needs:
- A sense of autonomy
- A sense of belongingness
- A sense of competence
- A sense of meaningfulness

Teaching children to think together

Teaching children to think together (not just alone) is important because: compared with controls, children taught how to think together, show an increase in:	Teaching to think together is helped by:
- Reasoning ability - Comprehension - Expressive language - Creative thinking - Examining assumptions - Willingness to speak in public - Willingness to listen to and consider others' ideas - Frequency of providing reasons or evidence for their view - Quality of interpersonal relationships - Confidence, self-esteem and persistence - Supportive group interactions (along with a reduction in negative comments)	Start with engaging problems or discussions in which children are likely to disagree or bring different perspectives (see dialogic classrooms below). Help *children generate* rules for their conversations, e.g. for problem-solving discussions: An example from problem solving might be: - We listen, and respect each others' ideas - Everyone gets to be heard - We give reasons when we agree or disagree, and we ask for reasons when people forget to give them. - Everyone is responsible for group decisions, so we try to agree. Help them reflect on their discussions through the lens of the rules they've created to improve their ability to participate effectively.

When children are thinking together about books dialogically, they use strategies publicly and those strategies are taken up by others, just as Vygotsky said, as follows (Dong et al 2008):
- Once a strategy has been used once in the discussion, the probability that it will be used a second time is .88. If used a second time the probability of a third use is .90.
- Time to first use of a particular strategy = 6 minutes. Time to second use = 3 minutes. Time to third use about a minute and a half.
- By the time a strategy appears in the conversation 6 times it is being used by 46 percent of the students. If used eight or more times, it is being used by 69 percent of the students.

Dialogic Classrooms are Characterized by the Following Language:

Symmetrical power relationships and mutual engagement	*Language for understanding how to think together and valuing doing so* (extended exchanges among 3 or more students, more follow-up questions)
- Ask open questions – ones that could have multiple answers - Use uncertainty markers: maybe, perhaps, I wonder - Invite multiple perspectives: "Are there any other ways to think about that? Any other opinions?" "Can anyone push back against that?" - Offer ample wait time - No judgment of ideas – yes, good, well…, right. - Practice with turn-and-talks - Do not repeat children's good ideas so the class can hear them (then they know they only have to listen to you). Instead, ask children to report to the class what their partner had to say rather than what they had to say. - Remind children to speak directly to each other rather than through you - Position the students in a circle so they can speak and listen to each other and see each other's reactions. - Arrange for class members to manage turn-taking without you (perhaps calling on each other, etc.) - Position yourself physically as much as possible at the same level, and either in the circle or outside it.	- Can we build that idea bigger? - I notice Laurel that when he was talking it sort of jogged your mind – what were you thinking? - Make sure each person has a chance to say something so that your learning grows from each other. - When you put those two ideas together for us, it helped us to understand that… - I heard each of you sharing your ideas with your partner. These great ideas will help us to understand the story better! - Building a conversation: - I wonder, perhaps, I think - That's like - I agree with you (because) - I disagree with you (because) - I can add on (I agree, and) - I have evidence - What do you mean? I'm confused. - What are you thinking? - What could we do about that?

Significance of Dialogic Classrooms:

"Students recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes" Dialogic classrooms overcome the potential disadvantages of SES, track, race, and ethnicity. (Nystrand, 2006)

Language to Expand Social Imagination:	*Children with a stronger social imagination*:
Use mental verbs and mental state language, particularly in the context of other people's minds. For example: - I wonder what she's thinking right now? - How do you think she feels? Why do you think she feels angry? - If you were in his position, what would you be feeling right now? - Show me with your face how he feels.	- Are more able to understand complex narratives, idiomatic expressions and irony Have more positive social skills, - Are more socially cooperative, - Have larger social networks, - Are viewed more positively by peers, - Misbehave less at home and school, - Have fewer angry responses in personal interactions. - Have stronger moral development - Have better self-regulation

Effects of Focusing on Engagement

Effects of Focusing on Engagement:
- Average reading volume went from three books/year to 42 books/ year.
- 13% then 16% more students passed the state competency test with a reduction in achievement gaps across subgroups.

- Increased; strategic /engaged reading, expectation of meaningfulness, strategy generation, stamina.
- Increased thinking together dialogically inside and outside school including symmetrical power arrangements, taking up conflicting perspectives.
- Improved social relationships, including engaging new people (valuing diversity), expanded trust, and engaging parents in new ways.
- Improved social imagination, increased empathy
- Increased academic, emotional and behavioral self-regulation

The Bottom Line:
1. A singular focus on academics will not serve children or their academic development well.
2. We have to take seriously the fact that the adult is not the only teacher in the room.
3. It is not enough to teach individual minds.
4. Multiple perspectives and uncertainty (without stress) are engines of dialogic engagement.
5. Focusing on children's engagement changes everything.
6. Making meaning is good. Doing meaningful things is better.
7. Teachers' language is their most powerful tool.
8. Children's academic development and their social development are inseparable. We need to teach children how to think together and live together.
9. Social imagination is a hub of social and academic development and self-regulation.
10. We should take seriously the fact that the adult is not the only teacher in the room.
11. Teachers and students are human beings. Consequently, they need a sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence, and they need their work to be meaningful and engaging. Focusing on engagement changes everything.

For more details on this topic (and a more readable form), read:
Peter Johnston (2012). *Opening minds: How classroom talk shapes children's minds and their lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Other Recommended Readings
Ruth Charney. (2002). *Teaching children to care: Classroom management for ethical and academic growth, K-8*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
Peter Johnston (2004). *Choice Words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Favorite books with great examples of language in context:
Martha Horn, & Mary Ellen Giacobbe, (2007). *Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Maria Nichols (2006). *Comprehension through conversation*. Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann.
Maria Nichols (2008). *Talking about Text: Guiding students to increase comprehension through purposeful talk*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.
Katie Wood Ray, & Matt Glover, (2008). *Already ready: Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.