

## Positive Teacher Language

### Improving Teacher-Student Relationships and Engaging Low Progress Students

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#### KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Teachers have found Positive Teacher Language (PTL) to be beneficial and impactful for primary students.
- Professional development courses that introduce new interventions or strategies need to be structured appropriately and allow time for deliberate practice.
- The provision of performance feedback to teachers during professional development helps teachers to improve on their use of the learned strategy.

#### BACKGROUND

Teacher's language can help create a supportive and conducive classroom environment for learning. PTL is one of ten practices in the Responsive Classroom approach (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007). PTL emphasizes the careful and conscientious use of words, voice, tone, and pacing by the teacher when talking to students, and together with effective listening skills, will nurture students to develop self-discipline, build a sense of belonging, and encourage students to learn and achieve in an engaging and active way. While research has shown that a strong teacher-student relationship is critical as a firm foundation for learning in

low progress students, there are few research studies in the Singapore context that look at the how-to of building teacher-student relationships.

#### FOCUS OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study was to evaluate the impact of a teacher professional development programme on PTL to improve teacher-student relationships and to engage low progress students. This project focused on the following three PTL: (a) *Envisioning Language* to give students a vision of what's possible; (b) *Reinforcing Language* to build on their successes; and (c) *Reminding Language* to guide students to meet expectations (Denton, 2014).

#### KEY FINDINGS

Teachers reported high acceptability of the PTL intervention, and they perceived that PTL is effective and beneficial for their students. However, the results revealed that the task of unlearning teacher talk habits and learning the new PTL presented a steep learning curve for the teachers. Performance feedback to the teachers led to greater use of PTL in the classroom. This study did not result in conclusive findings with regards to the effect of PTL on students' classroom engagement and teacher-student relationships.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

This research study contributed towards meeting the professional development needs of teachers who support low progress students by introducing and investigating the use of PTL in two primary schools. We gained insights into the structuring of an effective in-service professional development programme, as well as the process of change after the initial training. The close monitoring of the teachers' use of PTL after training revealed that further support was needed in order to see a change in the teachers' practice.

## PARTICIPANTS

Twelve teachers and 18 students from two primary schools participated in the study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We utilized a single-case research design, specifically, the multiple baseline across participants design. The outcome measures were direct classroom observation of students' classroom engagement and audio-recording of lessons to collect data on teachers' use of PTL. Teachers completed a questionnaire and were interviewed on their views on the acceptability and effectiveness of PTL.

## REFERENCES

- Denton, P. (2014). *The power of our words: Teacher language that helps children learn* (2nd ed.). Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Northeast Foundation for Children. (2007). *Responsive classroom: Level 1 resource book*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

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This brief was based on the project AFR 03/16 GEP: Positive Teacher Language: Improving Teacher-Student Relationships and Engaging Low Progress Students.

## How to cite this publication

Goh, A., Tan, C., & Tan, C. C. (2019). *Positive Teacher Language: Improving Teacher-Student Relationships and Engaging Low Progress Students* (NIE Research Brief Series No. 19-005). Singapore: National Institute of Education.

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