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Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions 2013 15: 124 originally published online 25 September 2012

DOI: 10.1177/1098300712459905

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Cloudy With a Chance of Sarcasm or Sunny With High Expectations: Using Best Practice Language to Strengthen Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Efforts

Hal Holloman, PhD¹ and Peggy H. Yates, PhD¹

Abstract

What's the forecast in your classroom? Are you forecasting cloudy with a chance of sarcasm or sunny with high expectations? A teacher's Language of Practice holds the key to creating a climate of mutual respect in our schools. This article will explore the power and promise of "teacher language," and how it can be used to promote respect and build positive relationships. We present the Best Practice Language (BPL) framework with its 11 word categories to assist educators in determining whether their professional Language of Practice is forecasting respect to others. This BPL framework is a foundation to strengthen Positive Behavior Intervention and Support efforts, and gives educators a practical method to transform their Language of Practice into BPL for promoting respectful schools.

Keywords

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, school improvement, school climate, school reform

Wow, did you hear that? Did you hear what that teacher said? It was so professional and so respectful. Absolutely brilliant! She used the right words at the right time. That student was about to . . . (fill in the blank) . . . and those right words at the right time made all the difference.

When teachers say the right words at the right time, the forecast becomes bright: sunny days with the highest expectations, followed by warm fronts of hope, understanding, and respect. What are these words that make all the difference? What is this language that promotes respect?

In essence, what you say as an educator is your Language of Practice (LoP). What we say to students, what we say to parents, and what we say to each other is our LoP. Sometimes our LoP is terrific! At other times, we wish we could have a "do over" and take those words back. Some LoP works effectively with students—some does not. For example, when a teacher's words are able to strike just the right balance between accountability and respect, everyone wins. We call the LoP that gets positive results Best Practice Language (BPL). More specifically, we define BPL as one's professional LoP that resonates with others, influences others, and produces consistent and promising outcomes.

What if we intentionally revisited and reconsidered the power and promise of the words we use to promote respect in our schools? "Working on our words" might seem like an abstract bridge to nowhere; however, we believe that asking questions such as the following will challenge us to reconsider how we communicate respect to others and how we develop strong and positive relationships in our classrooms and schools:

1. What does respect sound like to our students, parents, and fellow teachers?
2. What does effective Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) language sound like?

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Action Editor: Robert L. Koegel

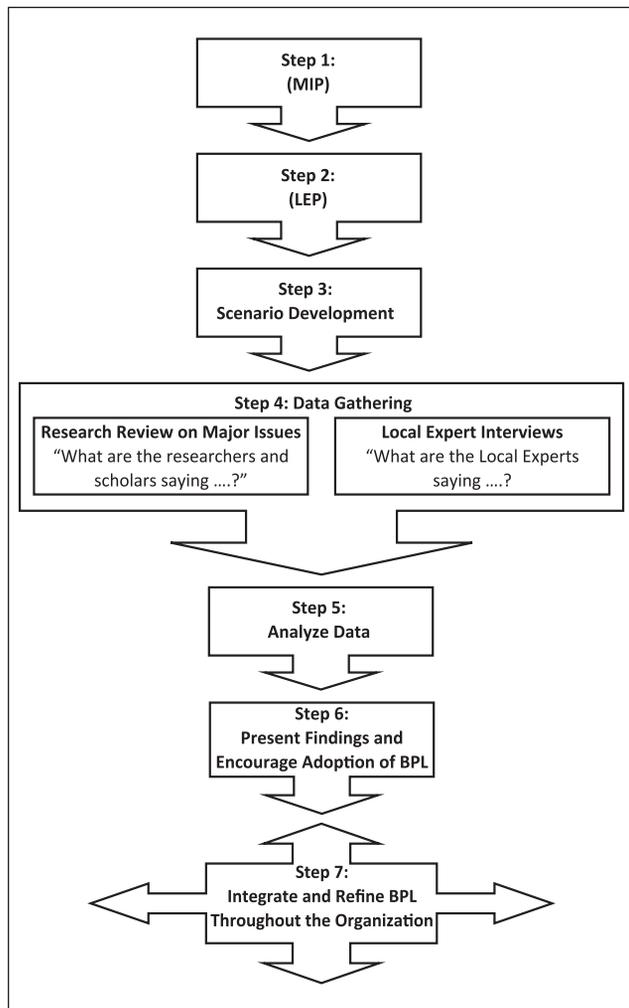


Figure 1. BPL reform model.

Note. BPL = Best Practice Language; MIP = major issues poll; LEP = local expert poll

Uncovering the BPL in Schools—A Collaborative Approach

In a collaborative study designed to better understand teacher language, we worked with and interviewed successful teacher leaders within a school system. We visited with principals, communicated with the superintendent and assistant superintendent, polled teachers, and interviewed local “teacher experts” regarding their professional LoP (see Figure 1).

During our visits, we uncovered a powerful style of teacher language that consistently produced positive results. While analyzing these authentic language examples, we identified 11 word categories that are the foundational and transformational components in the BPL framework. Teachers can use the BPL framework to consider how their LoP aligns with these 11 word categories and determine whether their professional language is forecasting respect to others. This framework (see

Table 1) gives teachers the ability to transform their LoP into BPL (Holloman & Yates, 2009).

Revisiting our LoP is not meant to be just another strategy piled onto the workload. It is meant to serve alongside current practices to transform the conversations that educators are already having in their schools. We propose that mining, adopting, and refining the BPL of a school is a practical, relevant, and meaningful method to capture the hearts and minds of the students we teach. As a school works together to “mine and refine” their BPL, it can be shared with all stakeholders—both internal and external to the organization—and paves the path to a positive and respectful culture.

Tomorrow’s Forecast: 100% Chance of Respect

Respect has a powerful ripple effect on those around us. When we give respect, we often get respect in return. When we respect students, they feel empowered, valued, and needed. When students feel respected, they are more likely to demonstrate respect for themselves and others. Students might not have a clear understanding of what respect is—but they certainly know what disrespect looks like and sounds like. They also know what disrespect *feels like*. When students are being disrespectful, our language and actions can certainly make things better or worse.

Disrespectful behaviors are like instant messages indicating deeper problems. What if we decoded these messages from the student as, “It’s not because I am a bad kid—I’m just struggling and I need your help. If we could get to the reason for my disrespect and help me eliminate it—I could be a good kid.” Some students show disrespect to others because they themselves are victims of disrespect. Their disrespectful behavior is an indication of feeling angry, threatened, insecure, jealous, or seeking revenge. When we recognize the underlying reason for the outward show of disrespect, it says to students, “I am here to help you.”

Building and maintaining a culture of mutual respect should be our goal. It begins with teachers who model respect. When students see us being respectful, they begin to understand what respect really looks like, sounds like, and how they can show respect for themselves and others. We all want respect from others, and when we freely give it, we expect it in return. However, when we show others respect and get disrespect in return, it creates a stormy situation. Trust is lost and relationships are damaged. Fostering a culture of mutual respect in your classroom helps to eliminate these stormy situations. As Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn (1993) noted,

Mutual respect is a two-way street. It invites young people to see adults as people who need nurturing and encouragement just as much as students do. A climate for mutual respect is created when teachers allow

Table 1. Best Practice Language Framework.

Instead of	Use	To	So that students
Permitting students to be irresponsible	Words of Accountability	Hold them accountable all along the way	Reach personal accountability
Unintentionally allowing students to become discouraged	Words of Encouragement	Rally students with the courage to overcome challenges, obstacles, barriers, failures, defeats, fears, apathy, and so on	Live a better way; to be all they can be
Harboring ill feelings such as unforgiveness and blame	Words of Grace	Separate the student from the behavior; forgive their past mistakes, and give them another chance to get it right	Experience and practice the power of forgiveness and second chances
Hoping that students find their way	Words of Guidance	Help students find a path to success and appropriate behavior	Practice self-management
Unintentionally discouraging and limiting students with low expectations	Words of High Expectations	Help students envision and pursue their best	Achieve their full potential
Survival for today	Words of Hope	Inspire a vision of a better tomorrow	Hope for and work for a better tomorrow
Speaking only to the minds of our students	Words of Love	Touch their hearts and demonstrate love and care unconditionally	Experience and practice the selfless power and purpose of putting others first
Focusing only on the course content	Words of Relationship	Establish a caring and positive connection with each student	Develop positive lifelong relationships with others
Allowing a climate of disrespect in your classroom	Words of Respect	Demonstrate a mutual admiration for one another	Model respect for self and others
Making assumptions based on your perspective	Words of Understanding	Discover the student's perspective	Experience and practice empathy for others
It is my way or the highway	Words of Unity	Nurture a culture of collaboration and teamwork in your classroom	Practice transformational teamwork through collaboration, agreement, and cooperation

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students to become involved in ways in which they can listen to one another, take each other seriously, and work together to solve problems for the benefit of all. (p. 2)

The ultimate goal is when students demonstrate respect intentionally. They make a conscious decision to show consideration and appreciation for their classmates, their teachers, and others. The following BPL examples promote positive relationships built on trust and mutual respect:

That was very unkind and disrespectful. How could you have handled that differently?

[Words of Accountability]

When I disagree with you—I'm going to do my best to model for you what it sounds like to respectfully disagree with someone.

[Words of Guidance]

I appreciate how you waited to speak and gave the other students your attention while they were speaking. That was an act of respect for others.

[Words of Respect]

If you don't respect yourself—then it's almost impossible for you to respect others.

[Words of Respect]

Shelter From the Storm: Using BPL to Create a Safe Haven for Student Success

Many students today come to school looking for and needing a safe haven. Your classroom should be a place where students feel safe and secure, a home away from home. It should be a place where feelings of fear, embarrassment, insecurity, and disrespect are discussed and addressed head on. Creating a safe haven for success begins when a teacher establishes a classroom where students feel safe—physically, mentally, emotionally, as well as academically. Your words and actions can create atmospheric conditions that foster an environment where students will be successful and get the support and respect they need.

Learning is enhanced when students feel safe, secure, and respected. Fostering this safe and respectful climate leads to significant teaching and learning opportunities where students are more likely to offer others their best and reach their full potential. The following BPL examples promote a classroom environment where students feel safe to offer the best of themselves:

There are no dumb questions! The best way to learn from each other is by asking questions. Your questions can help us all understand things better.

[Words of Guidance]

In our classroom we want to establish a climate where no one feels embarrassed to say one thing or another. We will work together to respect each other's opinions and thoughts.

[Words of Respect]

If someone makes a mistake in our classroom, it is important to think about how you react to that mistake. In our classroom we will treat others the way we want to be treated.

[Words of Understanding]

Sunny Days Ahead

Our local meteorologist uses every means possible to predict the weather in our area. As educators we “set and

regulate the temperature” to maintain the most favorable weather conditions in our classrooms and schools. As we share the BPL concept with teachers and future teachers, it resonates with them, and they envision sunny days ahead. As teachers examine the BPL framework, they say, “I need a copy of this framework on my desk as a reminder to me every day!” The 11 word categories are a great point of reference as we work to promote a climate of mutual respect. One teacher stated, “I always try to be professional when dealing with students and staff. I have started saying in my head ‘what comes out of my mouth next could make or break that other person’s attitude!’” Another teacher noted, “This information will help me self-analyze what I want to say to get the reaction that I need to help make the students successful.” A third teacher stated that revisiting her LoP will “help build better relationships with students.”

We hope the BPL concept will serve as a catalyst for fresh discussions and conversations regarding PBIS in your school. As we work to find the “right words at the right time,” we strongly believe BPL will have a significant impact on improving the climate of mutual respect in our classrooms and schools.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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