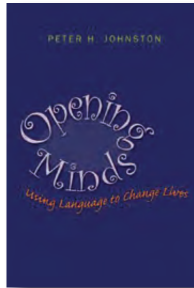
Professional Book Reviews

Books Offers Practical Strategies to Help Learning Communities and Students Succeed

Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives

by Peter Johnston

Review by Carol A. Lyons, trainer emerita, The Ohio State University



What teachers do and say has a profound effect on children's learning and development, writes Dr. Peter Johnston, a well-known expert in literacy learning and teaching. Furthermore, the things teachers say (and don't say) have surprising consequences on the lives of their students. As a result, struggling students oftentimes live in a world of frustration and failure because teachers do not create a learning environment to support and nurture their intellectual, emotional, and social growth and development.

Further compounding the situation is that teachers and oftentimes parents believe that individuals have fixed, unchanging characteristics and abilities. They think that some people are good at reading (or math, or writing) and others are not. Some are smart, some are not, and there really isn't much they can do about it. In this world, simple occurrences, like mistakes or unsuccessful attempts, are viewed as indicators of those fixed abilities creating a self-perpetuating limit on an individual's view of himself and his learning potential.

In *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives*, Johnston, turns this thinking upside down. Using classroom research collected over several years, he provides many specific examples of what capable teachers in kindergarten through Grade 8 do and say to promote learning and profoundly change students' views of themselves as learners. I will discuss three of the many lessons I learned from reading this thought-provoking book.

Lesson 1
Word choices and partially right responses matter.
What teachers notice, say, and do can either inoculate or confirm children's beliefs about their presumed abilities. For example, when teachers use the word *already* to discuss children's learning ("Let's see how many words you know *already*"), they convey that anything the child knows is ahead of expectations and that there is nothing permanent about what is known and not known. Another choice word teachers should use is *yet*. "Mick has not learned this *yet*," affirms that Mick's ability to learn is not fixed and that intellectual change happens.

To support children's developing competencies, teachers should also focus on partially right responding. I learned this lesson from David, one of my Reading Recovery students. After complimenting David for using meaning, language structure, and visual information while scanning the letters of the word from left to right, David asked, "Where is the *but*?" I was dumbfounded. He continued, "When I make a mistake you always say "*but*, and then tell me what I did wrong."

I realized that David never heard the positive feedback at the beginning of our interaction and just paid attention to what I had said after *but*. I needed to construct a much more-positive experience for David and the word *but* was closing the door. So from that day forward, I substituted the word *and*. "David, you read, 'The dog did not stay' which makes sense *and* sounds right and if you take a closer look at the end of this word (pointing to *stay*) you will have it." David quickly said, "Stop. The dog did not stop."

By first focusing on what David knew and had already done well and then what he needs to do next, the "negative" is framed as a potential positive. The role of partially right responding and positive feedback is critical to learning.

As Johnston notes, errors usually happen at the edge of learning…when we are stretching into new territory. When we make mistakes, it means nothing more than that. We need to learn from mistakes, and it does not mean we have limited abilities or are lazy, incompetent, or stupid. Learning and learning potential is never permanent.

Lesson 2
Engage students.
To create opportunities to facilitate students' thinking and subsequent learning, teachers must engage them. Students often disengage when they know there is a fixed body of knowledge they are expected to memorize (learn). We have all been in classrooms in which the teacher asked a question and students' regurgitate the expected "correct" answer.

Teacher: Name two major reasons for the Civil War.

Student: Fight over succession from the Union and fight over slavery.

If the teacher had said, "If you were a Black slave living in the south what would you think is the main reason for the Civil War?" or "If you were a northern soldier fighting in the south, what would you say are the major reasons you are fighting in the Civil War?" students more likely would become engaged and have a conversation with each other.

By inviting comparisons with others' perspectives, the teacher changes the classroom environment and the dynamic for learning. In creating a classroom context that offers uncertainty, inquiry, and opportunities for multiple perspectives, knowledge is constructed. Furthermore, students learn to think about information, build rationales for their thinking, and listen to others' point of view.

Lesson 3
Create opportunities to help children to think and work collaboratively.
From early childhood, children use language to think, make themselves understood and understand others. They also need to use language to think and work collaboratively with peers. Teachers are key to helping children learn how to do this.

Whether or not children succeed in this endeavor has much to do with the classroom environment teachers create. The most-effective teachers create a positive atmosphere in which each child feels competent and is excited and motivated to learn. Feelings of incompetence prompt children to retreat from challenges and to engage in avoidant behaviors that often exacerbate their problems. Creating a collaborative and supportive context for learning in which all children have an opportunity to contribute to the conversation and feel that they belong is important to children's social, emotional, and intellectual growth, development. Why?

Once children learn how to use language to think and work together, they notice how other people's thoughts stimulate their own thinking. They learn how to listen to other's ideas and perspectives, and in the process, value other's opinions. They learn how to agree and disagree, provide rationales for their thinking, and change their minds. They learn that each idea contributes to building a bigger idea and that they couldn't have reached that bigger idea without the group's interactions. They learn that thinking together is more powerful and engaging than individual thinking.

The above-mentioned lessons are just a sampling of the many well-conceived, practical lessons provided in Dr. Johnston's *Opening Minds*. I have discussed these three ideas because teachers can start incorporating them into their thinking and practice immediately. Additionally, it is important to start right away because our interactions with children influence who they think they are and what they think they can become. Over time, teachers' interactions affect children's self-concepts and their cognitive, emotional, and social well-being.

Educators must begin to pay more attention to how forcefully language shapes children's thinking, self-concept, and quality of life, urges Johnston, so that we can maximize every child's learning potential. In *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives*, teachers learn how to attend to what children say and do, and how to create a classroom learning environment in which children learn how to express themselves and work together. When a book changes the way you think and act, it becomes an experience you will long remember. Peter Johnston's book had this impact on me.

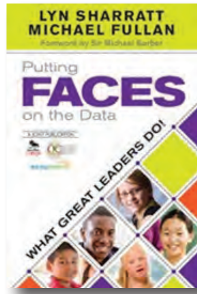
Reference

Johnston, P. H. (2012). *Opening minds: Using language to change lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Dr. Johnston will share insights during a 1-day Preconference Institute prior to the National Conference in February. Participants in this book study session will learn how to develop productive literacy learning communities and engaged, resilient learners who take control of their own development — and receive a copy of the text, *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives.* Preregistration is required. See pages 78–79 in this issue for more Conference information.

Putting FACES on the Data: What Great Leaders Do!

by Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan



Review by Anne Simpson, trainer and Reading Recovery Center director, Texas Woman's University

Reading Recovery professionals will find *Putting FACES on the Data* a perfect fit with their beliefs in and understandings of Reading Recovery within a comprehensive approach to literacy teaching and learning. The text places Reading Recovery as an essential part of school improvement and provides school leaders with ways to attend to individual learners by using data to inform instruction across the building and district levels. In the Preface, Sharratt and Fullan describe the challenges that schools face with data as "a glut" (p. xiii). Defined as the problem of too much information, the glut can distract schools into thinking that data are being used to improve student performance, when in fact, the actions needed to improve individual children's progress are never fully identified, put into action, monitored and adjusted to support learning. "FACES is about humanizing the teaching of each student and having the tools to do so systemically for all" (p. 6).

Sharratt and Fullan's first book, *Realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-Wide Reform* (2009), prompted the need to look more closely at data and see the faces of individual students. In *Realization*, the authors defined 14 parameters that contribute to sustainable school improvement in literacy and learning. These parameters form a broad base of actions including a commitment to shared beliefs related to student achievement, daily sustained focus on literacy instruction, and early intervention that specifies the importance of Reading Recovery (p. 11). From their work with schools attempting to implement these parameters, the authors were challenged to understand why some schools—even schools in the same district—produced different achievement outcomes. Working closely with school leaders to analyze data from 1998–2004, they came to understand that the schools that succeeded in producing sustainable outcomes over time attended to the details in each of the parameters. The 14 parameters and a self-assessment implementation tool are provided in Appendix A (2012, pp. 208–219) to support schools and districts with analyzing where they are in the process of implementing each of the 14 parameters, thus creating a guide for "putting faces on the data." The self-assessment instrument follows a gradual release of responsibility model for school leaders to use to deepen beliefs, understandings, and practices that ultimately result in sustainable success in student learning.

"The Power of Putting FACES on the Data" (chapter 2) frames the research conducted to understand how schools deepen and strengthen their work with the 14 parameters. Because Sharratt and Fullan's ultimate goal is to understand and impact organizational and systems change, the authors employed a research process to understand why, how, and what leadership skills are needed to support organizations in learning to put faces on the data. Chapter 2 describes the results of this research and frames the basis for in-depth discussion of the findings reported in chapters 3–5. More than 1,000 professional educators working in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia were surveyed with regard to three questions.

1. Why do we put FACES on the data?
2. How do we put FACES on the data?
3. What are the top three leadership skills needed to put FACES on the data? (p. 30)

Results of the three questions are described fully with figures and tables in chapter 2. The end results are synthesized into what the authors refer to as "drivers" for sustainable change, including

- collective capacity building,
- team and group development,
- strong pedagogy-assessment and instruction, and
- systemic actions.

Collective capacity building and team and group development are interwoven into chapters 3 and 4 as the authors detail the importance of and practices that link assessment and instruction.

"Making it Work in Practice — Assessment" (chapter 3) provides readers with a clear delineation of formative and summative assessment, with far more attention being given to formative assessment. Readers who appreciate the

reciprocity of reading and writing will enjoy the authors' reference to Donald Graves, who reportedly asked an audience to list each student in their class, write 10 things they knew about the student, and put a check beside each statement if the student knew that the teacher knew these things (p. 65). This example frames the importance of each teacher knowing each student—not simply by outcome data—but socially and emotionally as well. The authors present case studies, factual data, and multiple ways for teachers to "know" students. One important aspect of chapter 3 is the authors' focus on "thick thinking" (p. 68) which requires school professionals to conduct task analyses and spend time defining criteria that will create shared understanding about where students are in their progress to accomplish the desired learning outcomes. The intended learning outcomes and substantive feedback that students need to reach these outcomes become the focus of formative assessment described in the chapter. Ways to encourage student self-assessment, peer feedback, and parent involvement are also addressed in the chapter.

The text places Reading Recovery as an essential part of school improvement and provides school leaders with ways to attend to individual learners by using data to inform instruction across the building and district levels.

"Making it Work in Practice — Instruction" (chapter 4) provides the reader with detailed examples of how to support good first teaching and implement a case management system that ensures all students learn. Schools seeking to find a productive way to implement RTI will find this chapter one to read, reread, and refer back to many times. The authors begin the chapter with the importance of good first teaching in preschool and kindergarten. In their discussion, Sharratt and Fullan reference several studies nationally and globally that point out the importance of attending to early literacy learning. Good first teaching, as the authors define it, includes specific attention to oral language, writing, and gradual release of responsibility using shared and guided practice. The authors provide a full description of effective literacy coaches. In their roles as instructional coaches, the coach is a co-teacher and co-leader. Their work is to provide job-embedded professional learning. Instructional coaches work side-by-side with classroom teachers to examine areas of instruction including explicit learning goals, substantive feedback and level of questioning. The co-teaching cycle includes co-planning, co-teaching, co-debriefing, and co-reflecting. The model is fully described on pages 117–119 for readers who may be involved in a similar role. Acknowledging that for some students even good first teaching isn't enough, the authors define the importance of a case study approach for students in need of additional support. A second level of intervention case management approach provides an individualized plan for each student in need of support. The plan highlights strengths, observations, work samples, and setting short and long-term instructional goals. A template for use is found in Appendix C (p. 224–225).

Reading Recovery professionals will find their work described and valued in the next level of intervention entitled "Early Intervention" (p. 124–128). The authors state that early intervention is a "moral imperative" (p. 124) to prevent reading failure. According to Sharratt and Fullan, "[T]he valuable instructional skills modeled in the Reading Recovery training program are transferred as best teaching practices that can benefit all classroom teachers, making this a cost-effective model" (p. 125). The authors further address the issue of cost effectiveness, clearly citing the KPMG report on pages 128–129. The KPMG report, conducted in the United Kingdom, provides evidence of the economic impact that Reading Recovery makes at the broader societal level. The chapter ends with making a direct link between assessment and instruction with a section entitled "Collaborative Inquiry" that links assessment and instruction utilizing case study illustrations. The authors provide a circle of inquiry model to support school improvement. They note, "Today, we look to whole-school approaches to inquiry and teachers, at least in pairs, question their practice, scrutinizing their data, and reflecting on what's working, what's not working, and what could be done differently in their classrooms" (p. 130).

"Leadership — Individualizing for Improvement" (chapter 5) defines leadership in terms of "know-ability, mobilize-ability, and sustain-ability" (p. 157). School and district leaders ultimately control the potential for

sustainable school improvement. These leaders model continuous learning, thus building knowledge capacity in themselves and others in their systems. Diagrams and illustrations show how leaders link daily assessment data with daily instruction to support all students' achievement across the curriculum. "Mobilize-ability" denotes the leader's attention to involving everyone in owning students' achievement. This mobilizing element encourages students, teachers, and parents to join together in supporting all students in achieving literacy success. This leadership element Sharratt and Fullan refer to as "interdependent leadership." Learning Fairs provide opportunities for everyone to communicate goals clearly, support students' in attaining these goals, celebrate goal attainment, as well as identify the lessons learned in the process. "Sustain-ability" addresses the notion of continuous change. Employing a "we – we" (p. 172) mindset creates synergy for individual and group shared beliefs, goals, and vision as well as responsibility for student achievement. Leaders who work to develop these three areas ultimately build a shared "ownership" of all students.

Chapter 6 addresses the culminating task of "owning the FACES." The chapter begins with a case study of leadership that creates ownership. Owning the data suggests implications for policy and educational improvement at a systems level. Throughout the book, the authors provide clear case studies of schools and districts that promote shared, collective responsibility for student success. The following quote sums up the responsibility of ownership at all levels.

> Increasing students' achievement is the core business of education. Ownership of student improvement at all levels ensures that high expectations are set and students, parents, and staff are clear about the expectations and standards. Lead by example, demonstrating high standards for teaching and learning. Then monitor high expectations for all students and teachers by walking and talking daily, to look for and to celebrate examples of success against the high expectations. (p. 192)

The authors reject the notion that poor student achievement should be attributed to the student or issues of socioeconomic levels. Rather, Sharratt and Fullan provide a systematic way that teachers and administrators can utilize knowledge of each learner to help all students achieve academic success.

Putting FACES on the Data is a book for teachers and administrators to read together for the purpose of reaching interdependent practice. Reading Recovery professionals will appreciate the fact that the authors position early literacy and early literacy intervention as a foundational part of schoolwide reform. Classroom teachers, literacy coaches, and interventionists will recognize effective literacy practices they value and find helpful ways to incorporate these into daily and weekly instruction in co-leading, co-teaching relationships. Readers may want to read the case studies first or review the content in each chapter and then enjoy the case study illustrations. The authors provide study questions for school and district teams to use for self-reflection and analysis. These sections are labeled "Deliberate Pause" within each chapter. They compose the guiding questions in Appendix H (p. 236–242) for district professionals to use as a study guide linking the contents of the text to individual systems practice.

Intended for use across elementary, middle, and high school levels, the book provides detailed action for ensuring leadership that results in high levels of learning and literacy for every student. *Putting FACES on the Data: What Great Leaders Do*! can stand alone as a text to guide school improvement or be read in conjunction with *Realization: The Change Imperative to Deepening District-Wide Reform*. Both texts require that leaders understand the complexity of literacy learning, attend to the details of formative assessment, focus on explicit learner-centered goals, and place deep ongoing professional learning as central to school, district, state, and policy reform.

References

Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (2009). *Realization: The change imperative for deepening district-wide reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (2011). *Putting faces on the data: What great leaders do!* Thousands Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.