

The language of optimism

Karen Collum

Children's author; former teacher, Ballarat, Vic

Words are powerful. In the classroom, words are continually exchanged in the exploration of ideas, the sharing of understandings and the development of relationships. Words also give insight into whether a student is optimistic or pessimistic when faced with challenges, either big and small. Since optimists experience greater success in life, are happier and healthier, suffer less depression and may even live longer, the promotion of optimism within a school setting is a worthwhile exercise (Seligman, 1991). In order for this to occur, teachers would benefit from becoming fluent in the language of optimism.

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Optimism is not whistling a happy tune in the face of dire circumstances or the repetition of meaning-less, hollow words. According to American psychologist, Dr Martin Seligman, "The basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes" (Seligman, 1996, p. 52). When faced with events, either good and bad, we all have a habit of thinking that explains why these things are happening to us. Seligman calls this habit of thinking 'explanatory style'. Some people seem to be born optimists, brushing off disappointment and moving on to the next challenge with a smile. Others fall on the pessimistic side of the spectrum, convinced that bad things always happen to them and that they are destined to only ever experience disappointment. The good news is that optimism is not simply a function of genetics. According to Seligman (1991), "Pessimism is escapable. Pessimists can in fact learn to be optimists...by learning a new set of cognitive skills" (p. 5).

Explanatory style

Teachers can have a direct influence on the development of optimism by carefully listening to students' language, identifying pessimistic statements and reframing students' experiences in a more optimistic way. To do this, an understanding of Seligman's (1991) explanatory style is helpful. There are three dimensions of explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation.

Statements of permanence often include words related to time, such as *always*, *never*, *forever*, and give an indication as to whether

a student thinks a situation is temporary or permanent. For example, if a child is struggling with a new concept they may say,

"I'm *never* going to be able to understand this."

This is a pessimistic statement, as the child believes the situation to be permanent. An optimistic child may be struggling with the same concept but instead say,

"I'm having trouble with this *today*."

This child believes the difficult situation to be only temporary; tomorrow may bring the understanding they lack today.

Pervasiveness relates to the magnitude of the impact that an event has on an individual's life. Words such as *everything*, *nothing*, *everyone*, *no-one* are often used in statements relating to pervasiveness. For example, a child may have had a fight with one of their friends. A pessimistic child may say,

"*Nobody* likes me."

On the other hand, an optimistic child will say,

"*Renee* doesn't like me."

For the pessimistic child, the loss of a friendship is all-encompassing; for the optimistic child, the loss is still felt and grieved but is limited in impact to that one person or context.

Personalisation relates to whether blame for an event lies with the self or with others. *Me*, *my*, *them* and *he/she* are commonly found in statements relating to this dimension. For example, a child's sporting team may lose the grand final. A pessimistic child may say,

"We lost because *I* didn't intercept the ball in the last quarter."

An optimistic child might say,

"We lost because the *other team* were better on the day."

It is important to note at this point that optimistic thinking does not involve the shifting of blame. There are indeed times when an individual is at fault and should take full responsibility for themselves, however pessimists often take responsibility for things that are not their fault.

Students should be encouraged to apportion blame appropriately and to recognise that in some situations, there is in fact, no one to blame.

Reframing

With an understanding of explanatory style and knowledge of the key words for each of the three dimensions, teachers have the opportunity to reframe students' pessimistic statements into more optimistic ones. The following examples of reframing (with keywords in *italics*) illustrate how the language of optimism can be a powerful, positive influence within the classroom and beyond.

Example 1:

A student has a mishap in the Science lab.

Student: That experiment was a complete disaster. I *never* do *anything* right.

Teacher: Chemistry was a bit tough today, huh?

The student has made a pessimistic statement involving both permanence (never) and pervasiveness (anything). The teacher's response reduces the pervasiveness from a global 'anything' to a specific 'Chemistry' and the permanence from 'never' to 'today'. The teacher is not negating

the fact that the experiment was a disaster but is helping the student limit the impact of the negative experience.

Example 2:

A student is in tears because she wanted to play one game but her friends decided on another.

Student: No-one ever wants to play my game.

Teacher: Rachel and Madeline want to play something different today, do they?

The student's statement is pessimistic and contains pervasive (no-one) and permanent (ever) elements. The teacher's reframing provides a specific and temporary version of events which is a far more optimistic way of thinking about the situation.

Example 3:

A student does well in an English test after working extra hard.

Student: It was just a *fluke*. I guess I was having a *lucky* day.

Teacher: Sounds to me like all your hard work paid off.

The situation is a positive one, however this pessimistic student attributes a 'fluke' and a 'lucky day' for his success rather than his own hard work. This example falls into the personalisation dimension. Through the teacher's reframing, the student is encouraged to be more optimistic and take responsibility for their success.

Conclusion

The power of optimism cannot be underestimated and the long-term benefits for students and teachers alike are significant. Although it would be ideal for every student and teacher to experience a formal optimistic thinking skills program, there is much to be gained from informal approaches such as teacher-led reframing. Fluency in the language of optimism is one way teachers can have a profound, positive impact on the lives of their students, both now and long into the future. **TEACH**

References

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