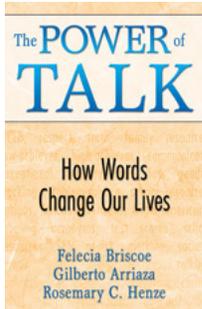


Professional Book Review

Briscoe, F., Arriaza, G., & Henze, R. C. (2009). *The Power of Talk: How Words Change Our Lives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. 200 pp., ISBN: 978-1412956024 (pbk). \$28.95.

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Everyday language matters. This is the straightforward argument in Felecia Briscoe, Gilberto Arriaza, and Rosemary C. Henze's book, *The Power of Talk: How Words Change Our Lives*. The authors of *The Power of Talk* offer a clear-cut, no-tech approach to an often overlooked issue in education: the way we use language in our schools. The authors believe that language frames the way we think, reflects the culture we live in, and even helps to construct cultural realities. Based on these underpinnings, the authors propose that educators need to be more aware of the power of language. Furthermore, the authors suggest that understanding language can help educators use words that embody the change we want to see in schools. Drawing on Freire's notion of the "language of possibility," the authors argue that educators are obligated to recognize that language shapes and alters our institutions and use this knowledge to advance social justice and improve educational equity.

Each chapter in the book is divided into three sections: (1) case studies and vignettes of oppressive and transformative text found in school settings, (2) explicit strategies for speaking transformatively, and (3) practical step-by-step activities to help educators develop the awareness and language skills necessary to use transformative language. One chapter, for example, focuses on the concept of othering. The chapter begins by illustrating a teacher-recounted narrative involving problematic othering language used in the classroom. The story relates how a high school student used the words "extreme" and "extremist" to describe the practice of women covering themselves from head to toe in Muslim countries. The authors use this account to explore the concept of othering and discuss what it means to distance and deride others. The authors also explicate the concept of marked and unmarked identities. The chapter concludes with specific strategies to avoid othering by reframing our language skill set to speak inclusively, such as explicitly recognizing different viewpoints and avoiding marking others unnecessarily. Additional chapter topics include disrupting prejudiced language, exceptionalizing versus democratizing language, recognizing stratifying discourse, and contesting deficit labels.

While *The Power of Talk* is written primarily for educators in leadership positions, the book is applicable to a wide audience, including students, educators, teacher educators, and researchers interested in enhancing their own awareness of language or creating dialogue about the ways and contexts in

which we use language in schools. The practical and valuable strategies and activities in the book provide educators the opportunity to consider language in a new light. For example, the chapter on exceptionalizing versus democratizing language offers a set of scenarios for educators to identify implicit or explicit examples of exceptionalizing language. The chapter devoted to disrupting prejudice gives a list of habits educators need to consider when interpreting and discussing numerical data about students. These applicable strategies and activities make *The Power of Talk* an important read.

Another noteworthy aspect of this book is that it attempts to avoid the superficial “politically correct” arguments often found in public discourse. This book does not suggest that we simply shun certain labels to avoid confronting or offending others. Instead, *The Power of Talk* encourages educators to understand the complexity of language. The authors believe that labels are an important part of understanding how language works, but metaphors, categories, and verbs also place value on certain individuals and groups. According to the authors, rhetorical features such as these are just as powerful as labels. Further, in many of the chapters, the authors address oppressive language practices by exploring the ways we speak, write, and/or sign; the context in which we do it; and the larger ideological systems that surround those words. Looking at these varied, fundamental aspects of language provides a complex argument that challenges current discourse.

The authors of *The Power of Talk* ask that educators think about transformative language opportunities. As the authors state, it is not enough to merely critique current language practices. Providing constructive, powerful language alternatives is key to creating change. Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze’s book *The Power of Talk: How Words Change Our Lives* compellingly addresses the ways in which the under-utilized tool of language can be used to promote much-needed social justice and equity in our schools.