



Language for Learning Policy

Approved and Signed March 2022

J Gill – Chair of Governors

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We want all of our children to flourish. To ensure this, we want to establish a culture within school which uses the appropriate language to develop a positive and aspirational ethos for learning. The language we exemplify and expect will ensure our children learn in an environment of positivity, appropriate praise and valuing one another. This is based on good practice, academic and pedagogical research and embraced by all colleagues and we encourage all members of our community to embrace this approach.



Introduction - Context

“Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow.”

Anthony J. D’Angelo

At St Mary’s CE School, we are mindful that the quality and climate of teaching and learning are shaped significantly by the language used and behaviour modelled by staff. How adults talk about learning and demonstrate their own learning habits has a very powerful effect on young learners.

‘Every word and action can send a message. It tells students how to think about themselves. It can be a fixed-mindset message that says: “You have permanent traits and I am judging them”. Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says: “You are a developing person and I am interested in your development.” It is remarkable how sensitive children are to these messages.’

Carol Dweck

Research shows that the language we use to talk about education and learning deeply affects how individuals see themselves as learners. Even something as simple as changing ‘is’ to ‘could’ or talking about ‘learning’ rather than ‘work’ makes a difference.

Ellen Langer (Professor of Psychology at Harvard) has shown that small shifts in a teacher’s language can induce marked shifts in the learning habits that students develop. e.g. if you say definitely that something *is* the case, students will take it literally and try to remember it. If you say of the same thing that it *could* be the case, they become more engaged, more thoughtful, more imaginative and more critical. That *could be* invites students to learn more actively and inquisitively. Students will question and solve problems more readily if knowledge is presented to them as being provisional. Langer found that when she probed their understanding with more creative and open-ended questions, *could be* students far out-performed their *is* peers.

Martin Seligman has shown that toxic words like ‘never’ and ‘always’ can be damaging to learners in certain circumstances. If a student says “I can never understand this type of problem” or “Maths is always too hard for me” this displays a lack of optimism and grit. Likewise,

if a teacher says “You are always distracted” or “You never complete your homework” it implies a lack of faith in the student to grow as a learner.

The word “**work**” has similarly toxic effect. At St Mary’s we talk about “**learning**” rather than “work”, and of “independent learning” rather than “homework” (research by Ellen Langer and Sophia Snow has shown that changing such terminology has a positive effect on how learners perceive tasks).

Our responses to children Carl Rogers (1957) notes, should show complete support and acceptance of a person no matter what that person says or does (Unconditional Positive Regard).

A: Growth Mindset Language

The language of ability and labelling students as high or low ability, top set or bottom set, or gifted or talented goes against the concept of growth mindset as developed by Carol Dweck.

At St Mary’s CE School, we talk in terms of **prior attainment** and **current performance** rather than ability, in the belief that everyone can improve on their scores and has the potential to grow their mind and that human qualities (including intellectual skills) can be cultivated by effort and application.

As staff we believe in students’ potential to grow their intelligence and we speak the language of growth mindset. We ask ***How can I teach this concept to this student?*** rather than ***Can I teach this concept to this student?*** We ask ***How will they learn this best?*** rather than ***Can they learn this?...***

At St Mary’s we avoid language that labels certain students or groups. So, we talk about “students with SEND” rather than “SEND students” and “pupils with EAL” rather than “EAL pupils”. This subtle difference can have a huge impact.

As staff we emphasise in our language and behaviour that making mistakes is a natural and important part of the learning process: learning from mistakes is what learning is all about! It is important that as adults we talk about our learning mistakes and how we put them right.

Evidence shows that the students of adults who preach and practise a growth mindset perform considerably better than those taught by adults who believe in fixed intelligence. The fixed mindset limits achievement.

B: Language of Praise and Encouragement

It is important to use praise appropriately. At St Mary’s we are aware that the right kind of praise can be motivational and affirming but the wrong kind can have negative effects. For example, making a big fuss of a student who gives the correct answer to a question can suggest that the teacher is surprised that the student knew the answer!

Furthermore, *‘The wrong kind of praise leads kids down the path of entitlement, dependence and fragility. The right kind of praise can lead them down the path of hard work and greater*

hardiness. With the right kind of feedback even adults (!) can be motivated to choose challenging tasks and confront their mistakes.”

Carol Dweck.

Feedback should avoid praising “ability”. Research shows that if students are told “That’s a really good score. You are really smart at this” or “You’re really talented,” “You’re a natural” they love it and it gives them a boost – but only for the moment. The minute they hit a snag, their confidence goes and their motivation sinks. Such praise reinforces a fixed mindset and leads to all the negative fragilities of fixed mindset learners. In contrast, if students get feedback acknowledging their effort and the resultant improved score (e.g. “You really studied for that test and look at how it is reflected in your improved grade” or “You tested yourself and prepared thoroughly and see how it paid off” or “I like the way you tried some new strategies until you finally understood that!”), this makes them far more willing to push themselves further and take on new learning challenges.

As Doug Lemov states, **“Great teachers praise students for their effort but never confuse effort with mastery.”** They use simple, positive language to acknowledge what the student has achieved and where appropriate show their expectation that they can go further to improve on their response: “I like what you have done. Can you take it further?” or “You’re almost there but there’s a bit more.. “ or “I like most of that..”

Over-praising a run-of- the-mill response sends confusing messages to students about the quality of response expected or required. Praise can be diluted by overuse. The best teachers keep their most effusive praise for the truly exceptional responses: “That was a really insightful answer.”

Growth Mindset Praise & Feedback

SAY THIS	NOT THAT
<p>“I can see you worked so hard on this!”</p> <p>Say this because it helps your children understand you value their effort.</p>	<p>“You are so smart!”</p> <p>Do not say this because it makes them think of intelligence as a fixed quality.</p>
<p>“It seems like it’s time to try a new strategy.”</p> <p>Say this because it lets your children know that they control outcomes by making choices.</p>	<p>“It’s okay. Maybe you’re just not cut out for this!”</p> <p>Do not say this because it makes your children think they don’t have the capacity to improve.</p>
<p>“I like watching you do that.”</p> <p>Say this because it conveys a message of approval of an activity they enjoy doing, regardless of outcome.</p>	<p>“You’re a natural at that!”</p> <p>Do not say this because the next time your children fail or make a mistake, they might think they do not have that talent after all.</p>
<p>“It looks like that was too easy for you. Let’s find you something challenging so your brain can grow.”</p> <p>Say this because it teaches kids that learning should be challenging, and if tasks are too easy then your brain isn’t growing.</p>	<p>“That’s right! You did that so quickly and easily; great job!”</p> <p>Do not say this because praising tasks completed without much effort paints effort in a negative light and encourages a fixed mindset.</p>

C: Language of Aspiration

Expectations are powerfully communicated and aspirations can be raised by the language that we use as adults. At St Mary's CE School staff talk about who the students are becoming and where they are heading without limiting language. In response to a high-quality discussion, a great teacher might say "You sounded like a university seminar group". An art or music teacher might use phrases like "This is what professional artists/musicians do".

D: Language of Character - St Mary's

Self Discipline		
What do you need to practice to improve? What support do you need to improve on this?	How could you organise things to help you learn better? What would 'even better' look like?	

Emotional Intelligence		
How does that make you feel? Who could you work with on that? Who did that in a different way? What do you like best about that?	How would you do it differently next time? How would you respond to that differently next time? Tell me about that.	What would have made this easier for you? How could I have taught this differently to help you? What else do you know that could help you?

Courage	Honesty and Integrity	Perseverance (Grit)
How could you make that more interesting/risky/exciting? What would you suggest if you were in charge? Chose something to challenge yourself. Give it a try!	Who could you learn from? Who did better than you? Why? How well did you carry out the task? How well did you stick to the learning rules?	What can you do when you get stuck? What are the tricky bits? Why are they tricky? How can you overcome your difficulties? Who managed their distractions well today?

E: Language of honour, respect and inclusion

At St Mary's CE School, the school community is made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. It is vital that the language used by all members of the school community conveys respect to and of all. Language that is discriminatory in any way is not tolerated and it is an expectation of everyone that they challenge any such incidence appropriately.

There is an agreed set of terminology that we use at St Mary's CE School.

We talk about:

- children, girls, boys, ladies and gentlemen and consider other terms in the correct context
- Black, Asian and White members of the community (and mixed-race)
- students with Special Educational Needs (physical or learning)
- people with disabilities, not handicaps
- those with English as a First Language or English as an Additional Language
- those eligible for Free School Meals and those not eligible

