







# UNLOCKING THE POWER OF **CLASSROOM TALK**

TEACHING KIDS TO TALK WITH  
**CLARITY & PURPOSE**



Shana Frazin & Katy Wischow

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To Pat and Jim Tolan  
for the gift of Kathleen



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## From Katy

I'm thankful to have grown up with a family addicted to talk. I was a shy kid at school but at home I talked nonstop. Thanks to my parents, Paul and Sandy, and siblings, Emily and Brett, for being my first and best conversation partners, around the dinner table, in the car, and now by phone and text. I am also so grateful to Eric Hand, Ed Hodson, Marie Mounteer, and Mike Ochs, who form the coolest writing group ever. Jessica Majerus, educator extraordinaire and friend, challenges my thinking every step of the way, in life and in work, and I'm incredibly grateful for her presence in my life, and in this book. The other group of people who have challenged and changed me the most are my students. To all my former students in Newark, New Jersey—thank you! Without the wit, joy, passion, strengths, and power of the kids I taught, I would be a different—and worse—person.

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## From Shana

I grew up in a home that was full of talk. My teacher mom and my rabbi dad had a lot to say about almost everything. And they encouraged my brothers and me to use our voices to do good and to do better. Daddy, I hope you read this book and kvell. Thank you for every casual conversation and every sermon (well, maybe not every!). All that smart talk took root in me and lives in this book.

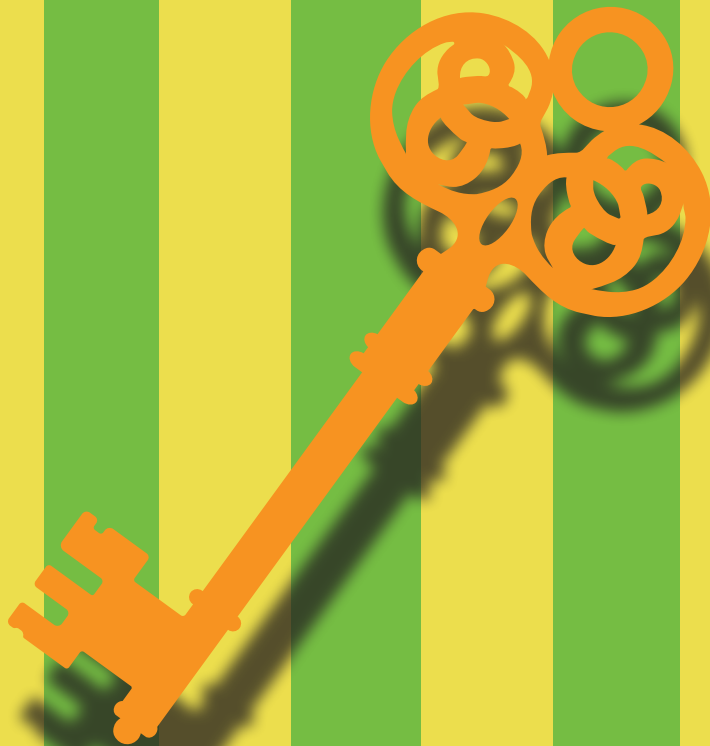
Unlike Katy, I do not have a formal writing group, but I do have an amazing circle of friends who always seem to have the exact thing I need at the precise moment I need it. My deep and abiding appreciation goes to Melanie Brown, Ken Miller, Sharon Pinsker, Barb Rossi, Ryan Scala, and Cindy Williams. And then there is Katy, my friend, thought partner, and coauthor. My world is bigger and brighter because of you.

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Finally, we both want to acknowledge Kathleen Tolan—mentor, leader, colleague, and friend. We are better in every way because of her.



# PART ONE



# Foundations of Talk



# 1

## Why Teach Talk?

**W**hy teach talk? Especially when there is so much competition for those precious instructional minutes? Surely other needs, goals, and standards are more deserving of your time and talent. A quick study of your class roster reveals kids who need more—more support with phonics, more work on fractions, more practice with main ideas. Aren't those things more foundational and more important than *talk*? Maybe. But talk transcends. Readers talk. Writers talk. Mathematicians, scientists, and researchers talk.

Every teacher struggles with time. We all have a limited number of minutes and an ever-expanding pool of content. How do we decide?

For us, that's why talk makes so much sense. When you teach talk, you are teaching something that kids can use in reading, in writing, in math, in science, in social studies. When kids practice talk, they're *talking about something*—and that something could be the Pythagorean theorem, or the Montgomery bus boycott, or the motivations behind Katniss' decision to overthrow the Capitol. Talk transcends.

Beliefs are only as good as the actions that reveal them. Because we believe that talk is valuable, that it's worth our time and our students' time, this book presents a lot of specific actions that you can take to bring talk to life in your classroom, or to take good talk and make it great, or to accomplish any other talk goal you have. But before we get into specific actions and strategies, we want to break down the big belief that “talk matters” into smaller parts and name some of the related ideas that guide our thinking and work on talk.

*Talk is a skill that can be taught, and learned, and improved upon. We can become more skilled at talk through instruction, coaching, and deliberate practice.*

Like reading, writing, math, art, tennis, singing, or anything else worth doing, talk is something that people can get better at. And as with any other skill, people tend to get better at talk through deliberate practice alongside powerful teaching and supportive coaching. Sometimes talk, in classrooms, is pushed aside to make room for other important standards and skills that need attention. And we get it—time is tight for all teachers, no matter how luxurious or cramped their schedules are. But if you're reading this book, chances are you believe in the importance of fostering powerful talk in your classroom (and most, if not all, state standards agree with you!).

Providing time for talk is important—but it's not the same thing as actually *teaching* talk. For kids to get really strong at talk, whether in partnerships, teams, or whole-class conversations, teaching is an essential part of the equation. In this book we offer concrete strategies to help you teach talk.

*Talk is a skill that crosses content areas—it's transferable—so it's important for all of us.*

We mentioned state standards earlier—and most sets of language arts standards include a whole section devoted to speaking and listening. But digging into the standards for other disciplines reveals that all disciplines value communication. In the Next Generation Science Standards, fully half of the “science and engineering practices” listed in the standards relate to communicating. The Common Core standards in mathematics list Standards for Mathematical Practice like “Construct viable arguments” and “Attend to precision” in communicating with others.

Of course, even if the standards said nothing about talk, you'd probably still be interested in stronger speaking and listening in your classroom, whether you teach math or science or music or anything else. Humans are

built to communicate, and in almost every discipline or career path our kids will encounter, they'll need to effectively communicate with others. What's more, they'll communicate for a wide variety of purposes, with a wide range of audiences. Our future scientists will brainstorm innovative solutions with colleagues; deliver compelling, persuasive policy briefs to government leaders; and educate interested neighbors and friends about the implications of their work. Our future video game designers will collaborate with co-designers using multiple platforms, introduce new games to the public, and maybe even convince skeptics of the value of their work. Our future athletic coaches will motivate their teams, speak to the press, teach their players new strategies, and plan with assistants. One theatrical director we know, J.C. Sullivan, spends time in every rehearsal practicing "red carpet questions," asking her actors to spontaneously respond to typical press questions. J.C. knows that although an actor's primary job is acting, another part of the job is to communicate clearly with audience members. Actors charm, persuade, teach, and storytell—on the fly as well as in the script.

So talk transcends. This is the work of every subject and every teacher. Throughout this book we'll use examples from math, science, and social studies along with language arts, and we'll share insights from fields outside of education.

## *There are lots of different reasons to talk—and why we're talking will affect how we talk.*

Part Two of this book addresses four big purposes for talking:

- talking to build relationships
- talking to play with ideas
- talking to clarify, analyze, and argue
- talking to report

One of our foundational beliefs is that, in our lives, we talk for a lot of different reasons, and we often adjust how we're talking to fit the purpose we have. Think of the difference between how you talk when you're convinced of your point and trying to win an argument and how you talk when you're

unfamiliar with a topic and trying to learn through the conversation. Or the difference between how you talk when you expect to deliver information and be finished with it and how you talk when you expect to open a conversation that will continue. In our life experience, we've certainly seen that in these different circumstances we tend to shift both small and large things in our communication patterns. We believe that this life skill is one that kids can learn, too—and we believe that really stopping to think about the reasons why we talk, or why we ask kids to talk in the classroom, will pay dividends in the quality of the resulting conversation.

### *Listening is a skill that matters deeply.*

The belief that listening is an important skill is not one that any teacher is likely to disagree with—teachers since the dawn of time have probably lamented the poor listening skills that seem to rear their heads at exactly the wrong times. You know, times like the moment before beginning a big test, or during a fire drill, or when the principal walks into the classroom. However, we also found that a lot of the valuable tricks we employed to strengthen listening were more about either minimizing disruptions to make listening easier or teaching kids how engaged listeners act so they could do it, too. What we didn't have were strategies to teach kids to listen more effectively all the time—not just when a teacher was there, not just when someone prompted them to utilize all they knew about good listening. We wanted strategies to teach kids to be lifelong listeners, the same way we try to teach kids to be lifelong readers and thinkers and problem solvers. We believe that listening, like speaking, is a skill (or a set of skills) that can be taught and learned and coached and practiced.

### *Talk is good for all kids.*

We believe deeply in the power of all kids, every single one. We believe that all kids can learn, want to learn, and can love learning. And we believe that talk can benefit all our kids—and that all kids can do it. In our own classrooms, as well as in the many classrooms we've worked with around the world,



we've encountered plenty of kids who don't like to talk in certain configurations, who find it challenging to talk, who find it challenging to listen, and whose particular needs make conversation an especially hard part of the day. And on every child's journey toward effective and joyful communication, this one year and this one class is just one stop.

But if you define talk as communication, self-expression, exploration, and getting ideas across, then it becomes even more urgent that all kids have access to instruction that helps them participate. There are lots of ways to lovingly support the kids who don't like to talk (see Chapter 9 for some starting points), and there's certainly no reason to feel like every kid must talk in every setting—and there are even ways to create alternative kinds of spaces for talk that your “doesn't like to talk” kid, or a kid who can't talk right now in a traditional sense, will love. But given the importance of communication in the world, and the likelihood that communicating in real time, in some form, will be a useful skill for almost all our students, it seems like a missed opportunity to be okay with the notion that some kids simply won't communicate at all.

That's also why we haven't separated out particular strategies that might especially support students with disabilities or emergent bilingual students. There are in fact many strategies throughout this book that will support many of these students, but you know your students and we don't! And the accommodation that works wonders for one student may be a total flop with the next. So if one of your particular wonderings is how to support your emergent bilinguals with talk, or how to help a student with a disability who is struggling to participate in conversation, we'd urge you to think about the kinds of conversations you are hoping to support that student in having, and then read through the strategies in the relevant section to imagine the possibilities. There are many teachers and researchers who do fantastic work supporting emergent bilinguals and students with communication disabilities, and we hope you seek out their work to get more ideas. We also hope that as you experiment and learn, you will share your discoveries with others (including us!). We aim for this book to be the start of a journey, rather than an end point.

## *Talk can be messy.*

Some of us embrace mess. Some of us ignore mess. And there are others of us who avoid mess at all costs. When we say talk can be messy, we mean several things. Talk can be messy when it raises issues and topics and ideas you hadn't anticipated or considered, like the time Shana cried at the paving-over-the-pool part of *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles. Her students, stunned by her emotional reaction, asked, "Why are you crying?" Shana, equally stunned, asked, "Why aren't you?" Messy.

Talk can be messy when most of the class sits quietly and passively, letting the same few kids engage in the conversation. Talk can be messy when you pull up alongside a small group to listen and coach, only to realize that they're deeply engrossed in a topic other than the one at hand. Talk can be messy when try as you might to convey your thinking, the words that exit your mouth do not (maybe cannot) capture the sentiment that fills your heart.

We suspect that the reason that we sometimes prefer a quiet classroom to a chatty one is precisely this messiness. Talking about reading, for instance, feels less tangible, less static, and certainly harder to assess than writing about that same reading. It feels a little unsettled. How will we know the kids are learning? How will we know they're "getting it"? How will we keep tabs on what's happening and justify what's happening to others visiting our classroom? But lots of things are messy, and they're still worthwhile. Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks were messy. Albert Einstein's desk was messy. Eating a fresh mango is messy. We believe that the messiness of classroom talk can definitely be unsettling and difficult—and also worth it.

## *Talk and listening are skills with big implications—talk can be a way for our students to change the world.*

People sometimes denigrate efforts, or other people, with "oh, he's all talk and no action." And it's true—sitting around talking about a dream, or a plan, or a way to make things better won't get it done. But it's also true that

talking is often part of the process of getting things done, is part of learning, and can be part of taking your message to a wider audience. Ultimately, talking *can* change the world, and we've all seen examples of kids whose voices have done this.

Talk is part of the standards you're asked to teach. Discussion is a powerful way to learn and process content across the curriculum. Conversation can build bonds, shaping a group of assigned strangers into a community. And in addition to all of that, talk can change the world. So when we ask, "Why talk?" one big answer is that teaching kids ways of communicating more effectively by coaching them in their talk, giving them opportunities to practice, and inviting them to make their voices public can help kids learn how to change the world.