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"Whatever! You Think I Care?"

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"Whatever! You Think I Care?"

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"So many people (children and youth) are shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully if only you were interested in them." - Sylvia Plath



I was thinking this afternoon of the misunderstood "language" from developing children and adolescents that we often receive as educators. This is the type of language that catches us off guard as we posture for the perfect discipline-minded "one-up" response. Sometimes it feels frustrating -- and actually downright awful -- when we hear our reactions unintentionally mirroring those

anxious or angry emotions, personalizing these conversations when, in actuality, it has nothing to do with us!

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The Meaning Behind the Language

Every day, we observe these developing minds and hearts as our students try to find their place, purpose, and way in the world. My question is: If we could decode and understand what is possibly being stated beneath a lexicon that feels inappropriate, disrespectful and hurtful, would we choose different responses and communication strategies? I believe we would.

Below are some recent examples of student responses that I've heard over the past few months and years in moments of hopelessness, shame, intense anger, and escalating conflict. I've arranged the student response and the possible deeper meaning or underlying feelings side by side.

What They Say	What They May Be Trying to Say
F*ck you!	I'm so angry, and you cannot possibly understand how I feel!
Go ahead, I don't care.	Nothing matters right now, and whatever you say to me or do to me will just add to the troubles I am facing and feeling!
Whatever!	We are so far apart on our views, it doesn't matter, because you will never walk my walk.
You think I care?	What you don't realize is that I am protecting myself and defending all I have -- myself!

I wasn't even talking! You didn't get mad at her!	Life feels very unfair to me, and no matter what I say, when I say it, or what I do, it's always my fault.
Oh. My. God!!	Once again, you are so far away from understanding or <i>hearing</i> me! I don't even want a relationship with you! I can <i>not</i> trust you!
I'm over it.	I need you to give me some space and time. Come back when you're ready to listen to learn instead of just listening so you can respond.

From my experiences and perspective, all of these responses originate from a perception of lack and scarcity. They are stating, "I am not enough," along with the pain-based thinking of shame. Feelings of shame create a self-protective and self-destructive cycle, and teachers often see this pattern more than any other adult. I believe this is why [functional behavioral assessments](#) are so helpful, because engaging in this process leads educators to look at the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences of an event or experience.

7 Ways to Begin a Dialogue

The most helpful strategy in this type of escalating conflict is really not a strategy, but a way of being in dialogue, checking in with "you" and recognizing the pressure-filled moments in the relational atmosphere. Our students are closely observing our responses. If modeling is one of the best practices we can employ, then modeling kind and personally detached dialogue is key in understanding so many of our students' underlying needs.

Questions are processed in the brain long after they have been asked, so the power of providing a question for deepened understanding presents an opportunity for our children and teens to answer in a completely different tone and direction. Sometimes we feel almost frantic to get the consequence into place -- *right now!* We can provide a consequence, but we can also wait to provide it until we are able to feel more neutrality between us.

The following questions and invitations call for a period of reflection between a negative reaction and a needed conversation.

1. I know you are so angry! I also feel that I could never know what it feels like to be in your shoes. But if you want to share what happened, I can promise you I will listen -- and listen hard.
2. It must feel so frustrating to come into this classroom and always feel that you are being picked on, or you are unable to do something successfully! What can I do? What do you need from me to feel even just a little better this morning?
3. Is there anything about you, your life, or experiences that you could share so that I could know more about how we can work this out together?
4. I am learning every day, just as you are, and honestly, I become frustrated sometimes that I don't have enough time for getting to know everyone better. What more can you share that would help me understand?
5. Do you think we could create a plan for the two of us? How could we develop some type of communication or agreement where we meet each other halfway? (This could be a behavior agreement, homework agreement, etc.)
6. Do you think or feel at some point that you might want to share your challenges or frustrations with other

students, and then share your plan of action with them? I see your strong mind and hot emotions, and these form a perfect equation for being a leader! How could you serve others in our school as you learn more about yourself? Could we make a plan for this over the semester or next few weeks?

7. If it's difficult to put into words, could you explain your feelings or the situation in another way? Art? Music? Poetry? Is there anything from home that you would like to share that would help me to understand more of who you are?

How do you defuse intense situations in your classroom and reach a greater understanding with your students?