1. **Valuing Student Talk**

Productive discussions require a classroom culture in which student talk is valued.

This is believing that the students are the ones who need to do the "heavy lifting" when it comes to talk.

Think for a second about your own classroom. Do your students believe:

- that they have an obligation to contribute to discussions?
- that they have a responsibility to listen and respond respectfully?
- that they must speak loudly for all to hear?
- that they will develop deeper understanding when they connect their ideas to other’s ideas?
- that they must ask questions when confused?

If this isn’t the case, what can you do to create this kind of learning environment?

In this Talking Point, we meet with teacher José Rosa and sociolinguist Sarah Michaels to see how José and his colleagues create this kind of learning environment in their classrooms.

2. **Set Norms and Expectations**

In the school we visited, José and his colleagues met and developed a set of expectations. They used lists developed by two other schools to help them get started, but in the end they created a set of expectations customized for their own school. They kept the list short, thought carefully about using child-friendly language, and decided to call each expectation a responsibility. They made copies to give to the students, and then introduced the list in each of their classes.

*Classroom Clip*

*Candace (teacher):* So, what we’re going to be doing a lot this year is having discussions about our ideas when we’re learning, and it’s really important that we have really great discussions because—even for me with grown ups—that’s where I do some of my best learning and thinking. Okay?
So, we came up, the teachers all got together and we went to school this summer and we came up with some—a set of expectations about classroom discussions. And, we’re going to use these and they are on this green sheet of paper that you have.

With the students, they discussed what each responsibility means and why it is important. Later students signed the agreement. Following the discussion, students then added the list to their notebooks so they could return to it frequently.

3. Clarify Expectations

To succeed in creating a classroom culture that supports productive talk and reasoning, students need to understand why these expectations are important and what they look like in action. This takes time and focus.

José (teacher): We then met with the students, the fifth grade class, on the rug, Colleen and myself met with them one day, and we talked about the norms. We talked about why it’s important to have norms when we’re having a large group discussion.

Classroom Clip

Colleen (teacher): I’m going to pass these responsibilities, and I want you to look at them and then, let’s think about them a little bit and let’s see if these sound like acceptable responsibilities to you guys for our future discussions. So, if you read at the top it says, my responsibilities during discussion, I agree that I will . . . what’s the first bullet there, John?

John (student): Explain my ideas.

Colleen: What do you guys think about that as a responsibility to a discussion? Do you think “explain my ideas” is important? [Yes.] Okay, you cannot just agree though, because you just agreed, that “explain my ideas” are important. You have to explain why.

José (teacher): Can we talk a little bit about what it looks like when we’re showing [Yeah, I was just thinking from . . .] someone we’re listening?

Tshala (student): Say if I’m talking and Humsa’s raising his hand. He’s not really listening to me, because he’s like thinking about what he has to say.

José: So, maybe when someone is talking to wait until they’re done to raise your hand?

Stephanie (student): Like what she was saying, like if somebody is talking and somebody is raising their hand, if she’s done talking, then you could raise your hand and they’ll call on you.
José: Marisol.

Marisol (student): If someone is talking you should give them like eye contact and that also shows them that we’re listening to what they are saying.

José: What do you think about that one, eye contact? What do you think, Lucas?

Lucas (student): I think that’s a great idea, cause if you show eye contact, then they can – they’ll see that you’re listening to them.

4. Reinforce Expectations

Once introduced, the expectations need to be revisited again and again. To do this, teachers often:

- revisit the list
- stop to remind students of their obligations
- gently hold students accountable
- take time to reflect with the students, and
- remind students that this kind of talk is expected of everyone.

Sarah (sociolinguist): So, you’ve established the norms. We know that they don’t just magically—so what do you do along the way to keep building them and --- ?

José (teacher): Well the first thing we have is a poster, a chart, which has the norms and those are published—those are put on the wall. Prior to every science talk session, I refer to the norms ahead of time. If there’s one particular norm that we need to focus on during that session, I would tell them, okay, today I want us to focus really hard on “X.” Or now we’re going do all of them at the same time. We might just remind the students of what the norms are, and then we get started.

Classroom Clip

Aadina (teacher): Again, remember to share our thoughts with the group, guys. Remember you’re talking to each other and learning from each other and you know that you’re listening when you are making eye contact with each other. So, who wants to try? Mathius, do you want to talk to the group about the conclusion you came up with? And let’s make sure everyone is looking at Mathius to show that we are listening to him.
5. Include All Students

Sarah (sociolinguist): You have a lot of quiet kids at Mason. What have you done to work with that?

José: It’s actually really difficult for students, I’ve noticed, to first realize that they cannot hear or not understand what is being said, but not only that, but for them to realize that they have a responsibility to let the person who is speaking know that they cannot hear them. They take it for granted that they cannot hear and they just let it slide.

Classroom Clip
José (teacher): [Calls on Imanni. Her response is difficult to for all hear and therefore inaudible on the tape] Can anyone hear what she said over there?

Sarah (sociolinguist): So, one thing that happens when teachers start using talk often is that there are a few reliable kids that they know they can depend on, and very often those kids will carry the ball. And in a discussion, if you have kids raising their hand, and you call on them, and a few kids keep doing that—it almost seems like you have a good discussion going. And of course you’re hoping that others are hearing.

But the reality is, when that happens, the other kids quickly suss out the situation and realize that they don’t have to talk, that others will talk for them. And they actually stop listening in the same way that they need to in order to learn from or have something interesting to say. So, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. So you can have quite a bit of talk, and it can be very inequitable and unproductive for a lot of kids. And so, it isn’t trivial to figure out how to do science talk that is equitable.

6. How Long Does It Take?

Sarah (sociolinguist): They say that to really establish these norms can take 6 months to a year. Which sounds like an enormously long time. And it’s true that once if you establish the norms within the first few weeks, kids will begin, but it really can take that long to fully, fully establish a new culture. But once you do, it’s the kids for life.