

# Implementing *Accountable Talk* discussions in math

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"It definitely makes my heart smile when I hear a teacher say, 'I just stopped what I was doing because the student knew more than I did and just took over!' or 'I began to feel frustrated because we were not able to work through the content the way that I originally planned, but I learned so much about what they know and have experienced by re-framing some of my questioning and allowing them to create the questions too. It DOES matter who's talking in class because the amount of talk that students do is correlated with their achievement.' The more time the students have practicing their thinking, listening and speaking skills around content, the more ownership they have over their learning."

This quote comes from April Perry-Schlatterer, the principal of Braddock Hills Elementary School (BHES), a part of Propel Schools in the Pittsburgh area, and she is speaking of the school's focus on *Accountable Talk*<sup>®</sup> discussions in math classrooms this year. Braddock Hills partnered with the IFL to coach teachers in the implementation of high-level tasks and how to facilitate productive discussions around mathematics.

Shaasia Jackson teaches kindergarten at BHES and says, "One of the greatest accomplishments for me is watching my students interact with each other and sharing their responses. It helps them learn from one another and it also helps me understand how my students think as learners."

Facilitating productive discourse in mathematics is one of the eight effective teaching practices named by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Teachers must be "engaging students in purposeful sharing of mathematical ideas, reasoning, and approaches using varied representations" and "facilitating discourse among students by positioning them as authors of ideas who explain and defend their approaches." (2014, p 35). Facilitating mathematical discussions also helps students develop a deep understanding of mathematical concepts (Cross 2009; Kazemi and Stipek 2001; NRC 2001). These discussions do not happen by accident; they take planning for what student work will be shared and what questions will be asked to elicit the deep mathematical ideas.

We often hear a common theme from teachers, as Ms. Jackson expresses, when it comes to creating space for talk. "I think the greatest challenge for me was time. Sometimes it takes longer to have these *Accountable Talk* discussions. I believe the key to overcoming this is being creative and making sure the questions and the discussions are engaging." She also goes on to say that taking that time yields success for students. "I think *Accountable Talk* has helped my students think about math on a deeper level. It makes the students want to understand the principles of the problem and how to solve it in comparison to other problems."

Principal Perry-Schlatterer adds, "Many teachers are reluctant to turn the class over to collaborative learning, or expression of thought, for fear that they will lose control and thus lose valuable instructional time, when actually, it is quite the opposite. We can empower our students to be in charge of their own learning by creating interesting, open-ended



tasks that target real-world skills, meet our learning objectives, and enable students to make choices and then measure and reflect on their progress."

As the Assistant Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for Mathematics for Propel Schools, Lindsey Smith is always taking stock of where teachers are in their practice and what they need in order to be supported to try pedagogy that might be new for them. "Improvement work takes time and failure. Teachers need to feel a sense of trust at many levels. As leaders we have to be careful about how we communicate the need for change and about how we set up a culture of professional learning. Focusing on the why behind what we are doing, being explicit about the difficulty of the work but also the payoff, that we learn from our failures and by taking risks, and staying focused on the goal of student learning are all essential to the success of the work."

Change is often difficult, but the outcome is worth it when we see student learning! Ms. Smith adds, "One noticeable difference in the classrooms that have been working most closely with the IFL coach is the amount of student-to-student talk that is occurring. Students are much more

in tune with the contributions of their classmates now. They are seeing themselves as contributors and not just as recipients of the learning."

Facilitating talk in which students are all actively engaged in the learning community, attending to the mathematics, and are pressed for rigorous thinking is a lot to undertake, especially in a single math discussion. Smith shares a story that exhibits the critical nature of talk:

"A teacher was really reinforcing the idea that students are expected to be able to re-explain what a classmate is saying in their own words. It was quite painful at first, going back to the same student again and again to re-listen and try again, but the teacher was persistent and did not give up. At the end of the lesson, the teacher debriefed with the class to get their reactions and reflections on what they had been practicing that day. One of the students, the one who was pressed multiple times during that particular lesson, shared that they 'liked having to really listen to each other'. This made me (and the teacher) realize that sometimes what seems uncomfortable to us is not so uncomfortable to students, and by protecting them in the moment, we are robbing them of learning." ■