

Spiraling Up! Framing Conversations About Students

PURPOSE

This tool provides a set of characteristics for analyzing conversations about students' behavior, learning, development and needs. It supports upward spiral conversations, which contribute positively to beliefs about and interactions with students.

DIRECTIONS:

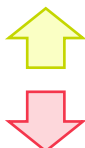
First, analyze the sample phrases to activate background knowledge about upward and downward spiral conversations and build shared understanding. Then, as part of your ongoing conversations within intervention and enrichment structures, as well as during more informal conversations about students (*e.g., in the teachers' lounge, with caregivers*), identify opportunities to reframe a downward spiral conversation upward.

Decades of research across disciplines, including educational research, psychology, linguistics, and even advertising and marketing help us understand the importance of language in shaping our beliefs and behavior. We know this to be true from phrases like "Sale ends tonight!" to "Girls aren't good at math."¹ As educators, the language we use to talk about students shapes what we think of them, how we treat them, and what types of opportunities we provide.

Conversations about students within intervention and enrichment structures may contribute to either an upward spiral, where we are shifting our understandings, beliefs and approaches to better support and empower students, or a downward spiral, where we are exacerbating problematic beliefs, limiting our level of understanding and empathy, and diminishing our ability to support students, and instead feel as though we must exert high levels of control over them. As you engage in conversations about students with other school staff, community partners and families, consider how your language may contribute to an upward spiral for your collective treatment of students.

Analyze the following phrases. Do they contribute to an upward or downward spiral conversation? Why? Then, read through the characteristics on the following page and add to or adjust your response.

I wonder why the student seems to have a hard time in math but does well in writing. What have you noticed? Is there anything we can learn from their experience in writing?



Why?

This student has always been difficult—it's not your fault. Honestly, I'm just not sure this is the place for them—they don't care and are having such a negative impact on their classmates.



Why?

I am worried because this student seems to be having a really hard time. Who can we talk to who has a close relationship with them so we can figure out what supports might be most helpful?



Why?

You know that this student has gotten away with bad behavior their whole life at home. What do you expect for school?



Why?

¹ Beilock, S., Rydell, R., & McConnell, A. (2007). Stereotype threat and working memory: Mechanisms, alleviation, and spillover. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 136(2), 256–276.

Characteristics of Upward Spiral Conversations about Students

	Asset-Focused	Context-Oriented	Opportunity-Driven	Open and Curious
Description	An important outcome of upward spiral conversations is that they help adults develop understanding of students' strengths, interests, and positive contributions. This allows adults to proactively build upon these assets and increases positive interactions.	We know that students' learning, growth and behavior occur and develop in context. When having conversations about students, it is important to orient observations toward the student as well as the relationships, environment and experiences around students.	The science of learning and development tells us about the enormous malleability of the brain, given the right conditions. Collaborative conversations can help us see through challenges as opportunities to grow in our ability to support students.	We know that variability and unique developmental pathways are expected parts of how students learn and grow. Open and curious conversations seek to understand differences without judgment, continuously expanding our perspectives on students.
Watch Out!	While it can be important to acknowledge difficulties that students are experiencing, it's important to avoid deficit thinking, or a primary focus on student risk factors and what they're missing.	Especially when students are struggling, it can be tempting to focus on them – what they are doing wrong (watch out, deficit thinking!) and what is wrong with them. Remember, we can't change students, but we can create contexts that unlock their potential.	When students struggle, it can feel like a threat, causing stress and overwhelming our limbic system. Watch out for fight, flight or flee responses to students that make it harder to meet them where they are with supports.	Our brains are wired to use groupings, labels and stereotypes to make meaning of the complex world around us. Yet, we also know about the negative impact of these cognitive biases on students. Watch out for assumptions that hinder your ability to deeply know students as individuals.
Prompts	<p><i>What are some of this student's strengths and interests? How can we learn more about what makes them happy and engaged?</i></p> <p><i>What is the student already doing that we can build upon?</i></p> <p><i>What are some ways that we might help highlight this student's strengths within our community?</i></p>	<p><i>What have we tried so far? How did it go?</i></p> <p><i>What is the student's relationship with you like? What about with peers?</i></p> <p><i>What works well for this student in their classroom environment? What is difficult for them?</i></p> <p><i>What broader contexts (schoolwide, home, etc.) might be contributing to what you have observed about the student?</i></p>	<p><i>What supports might this student benefit from, given what you have observed?</i></p> <p><i>What is this student teaching us about what might work better for them and/or the whole class?</i></p> <p><i>Why might this feel like a threat rather than an opportunity? How can we manage our stress as adults in order respond to this student compassionately?</i></p>	<p><i>Who else might have ideas about what would work well for this student? Consider community members, families and caregivers, other staff, etc.</i></p> <p><i>I'm curious to know more – I wonder what [student] would say about this!</i></p> <p><i>What assumptions might be limiting the way we see this student? How could we let go of some of these assumptions?</i></p>