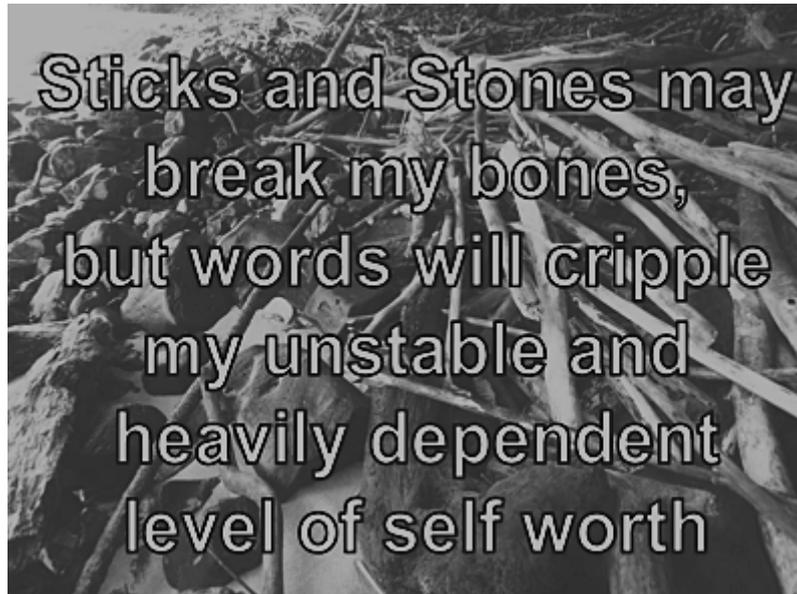


## Sticks and stones

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Do you remember that old expression that starts, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but...'? After recent events in the media, I have focused much of the in-class facilitation I undertake on looking at the language we use in the classroom. How often do we throw away comments, especially while in the stress response, without thinking about the effect they can have? The phrase above usually finishes with '...words can never hurt me', but just how true is that? Of course, rewording the phrase into, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can do lasting damage to my self-image, confidence, and resilience' just doesn't have the same ring to it!

I took the opportunity to share a story with a group of students earlier this week, one that has stayed with me ever since the experience. Several years ago, while teaching in an all-boys literacy-focussed class, I encountered a very 'creative' young man. I intentionally use the term 'creative' to try to show that he was a thinker who embraces lateral thought, and often moves in an unexpected direction when compared to peers. He thought more laterally than any other student I've encountered. He had an incredibly vivid imagination that would push him to the edge of, and beyond, his levels of self-control. Yes, he'd been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but that's in addition to his lateral thinking style. Much of his classroom behaviour focused on using an incredible bank of avoidance strategies when it came to working independently. He often told jokes, shared funny stories, and went out of his way to make others laugh. The attention he received from others seemed to encourage him to pursue greater levels of laughter, often at his own expense. It was that behaviour that saddened me. The attention that followed visibly lifted him, however, the disregard for whether that attention was positive or negative led us to loggerheads on

many occasions, but everything changed after I asked why. You see, it turns out that two years previously he had been taught by a very experienced, stern male colleague of mine. Just a week or so into that year, the teacher stopped the class, highlighted the student's distracting behaviour, and promptly labelled him the class clown. And it stuck...

My intention in retelling this story is not to highlight any negative elements of my former colleague's practice, rather, merely to show that the words we use on a daily basis can have a tremendous effect on students, often long after they have left our classes and schools. The young man I taught was convinced it was his role. He explained very clearly that, although initially very hurt by the comment, he had decided that, if that was his label, then he would perform to it. I had never heard him use the range of vocabulary and show the clarity of understanding in any other activity or conversation we had undertaken. Not only had he gone away to look at what the role of a clown was, he had decided that his teacher — the person he looked up to and had been so excited to be taught by — must be correct, and that was simply his lot in life.

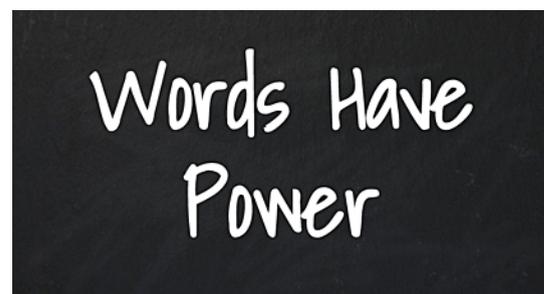
So, I return to the classroom earlier this week, facilitating around the very challenging issue of suicide as a result of cyber bullying. The words out of the mouths of friends, and the text from messages on our screens have a genuinely profound effect on shaping who we become. As teachers, we have students' lives in our hands every day, and yet, how often do we allow the short, sharp, frustration to escape from our mouths? Dr Haim Ginott once wrote:

"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized." (Ginott 1975)

From the moment we meet our learners, to the moment they leave us, we hold the power to make or break their day. Their desire to know about who we really are, the common need for constant approval, or even the knowledge that school is their only safe place, often places us teachers as the greatest influences in a child's life.

Dr Ginott held several core beliefs that underpinned his approach to communicating with students:

- Never deny or ignore a child's feelings.
- Only behavior is treated as unacceptable, not the child.
- Depersonalize negative interactions by mentioning only the problem. "I see a messy room."



- Attach rules to things, e.g., "Little sisters are not for hitting."
- Dependence breeds hostility. Let children do for themselves what they can.
- Children need to learn to choose, but within the safety of limits. "Would you like to wear this blue shirt or this red one?"
- Limit criticism to a specific event—don't say "never", "always", as in: "You never listen," "You always manage to spill things", etc.
- Refrain from using words that you would not want the child to repeat.
- Ignore irrelevant behaviour.

Term one continues with a hiss and a roar. The workload is relentless, and by now (week seven at time of writing), many of the teachers I work alongside are nearing exhaustion. The cortisol, or stress hormone, is building steadily, and, combined with fatigue and mental tiredness, the stress response has an opportunity to rear its head and strike. Although Dr Ginott's communication approach is many decades old, there are commonalities with more recent research (see additional reading) and modern learning pedagogies. Our learners remain at the centre of learning; we allow their expression and emotions to become part of their agency. The concept of a 'Growth Mindset' continues to filter into teachers' reading lists, helping us limit criticism and focus on the 'yet.'

Sticks and stones CAN break your bones, and most of the time they'll heal. But words — words have the power to change lives, both for better and for worse. I'll leave you with this...

*"Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seed of either success or failure." (Napoleon Hill)*

### Recommended short reads:

- The Impact News: The Power of Words
- ASCD: [The Power of an Effective Teacher and Why We Should Assess It](#) (Chapter 1)
- CORE blog: [A Teacher to Remember](#)
- Brainwaves: [Relationship-Shaping: Teacher Consistency and Implications for Brain Development By Miriam McCaleb & Nathan Mikaere-Wallis](#) (PDF)



### James Hopkins

[James Hopkins](#)'s passion lies in Modern Learning Practice. He helped in the development and planning of N4L's Pond, being invited to participate in thinking and learning with other

Pioneer Educators, as well as writing several pieces for N4L about Pond. James developed Learning Network New Zealand's app for both iOS and Android, incorporating interactivity and communication within the app to compliment the business model used by the company. He also developed the online community associated with #primedchatnz on Twitter. As a result, he has interviewed and worked with Tony Ryan, Graham Watts, and several others, connecting them to the Twitter community, and organising an online chat directly associated to 45min interviews broadcast via YouTube/Google Plus.