**7-28-21 SEL Article** **What to Say Instead of ‘I’m Proud of You’**

**SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)**

What to Say Instead of ‘I’m Proud of You’

A few phrases middle and high school teachers can use to cultivate conversation while celebrating student achievements.

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In the past, when my high school students shared some good news—they’d aced the interview or made the team—I’d answer, beaming, “I’m so proud of you.” I was genuinely happy for them, but something about my response felt off. First, it tended to end the conversation. Second, it shifted attention away from the student and onto me, as if my approval were the goal.

I wanted my students to spend more time basking in their accomplishments and taking ownership for their successes. As I experimented with how I responded to their achievements, I discovered four simple strategies.

**1. ‘TELL ME MORE’**

My favorite phrase to help students slow down and savor a particular achievement is a simple “Tell me more.” If I have a talkative student and plenty of time to listen, I might even open with a cheerful, “Tell me everything!”

Student: “I got a solo in the choir show.”

Me: “I’m so happy for you! Tell me more.”

Student: “I got my driver’s license yesterday.”

Me: “Congratulations! Tell me everything.”

This strategy allows students to relive the moment and magnify their happiness through sharing. I also like the way the open-ended phrase gives students control over the details they choose to share.

**2. ‘YOU MUST FEEL...’**

Turning your students’ attention to their emotions also helps them more fully inhabit a moment. To support this, I often make a guess about their feelings. Instead of telling them I’m proud, I might say, “Wow! That’s so exciting. You must feel really proud.”

I still remember the first time I used this technique. In my study skills class, I leaned down to talk to a student who shyly shared that he had done well on a test in a class in which he usually struggled. Instead of answering, “I’m proud of you,” I said, “I know how hard you worked. That must feel so satisfying.” “Yes,” he answered. And then he held my gaze with a well of emotion in his eyes. “Yes, it does.”

Although naming students’ emotions sounds as if it might shut down conversation, it generally has the opposite effect. In fact, asking students “How does that make you feel?” about a happy moment can sound unnatural (“Good, duh”)—or like a TV therapist. Also, because some students are just building their emotional awareness and vocabulary, offering them some language can be a powerful opening. The trick is to make sure we pause afterward to allow space for students to confirm, elaborate, modify, or correct the guess—and to be alert to what they communicate with their tone and body language.

**3. ‘WHAT DID YOU DO TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN?’**

One of my primary goals is to help students become conscious of choices and patterns that lead to success. So when a student achieves a goal, I often follow up with variations on the question, “How did you make that happen?” I might say,“You got an A on your math test! That’s fantastic. You must feel really happy. What did you do to make that happen?”

Some students can easily list all the steps. Others, less practiced in self-reflection, might answer with “I don’t know” or “I guess the test was just easy.” In that case, I often add my own observations, or questions, to help them build self-awareness: “I noticed that this week you worked with a math tutor and finished three out of five of your math assignments. That seems to have worked for you.”

This gives students the opportunity to own their experience and see the teacher not as someone they are in danger of disappointing but as an ally.

**4. ‘I APPRECIATE...’ OR ‘I ADMIRE...’**

All of this doesn’t mean I never share my positive feelings with my students. Now, more than ever, I regularly and specifically note positive actions: “I noticed that every student participated at least once in class discussion.” When their actions make my life easier, I let them know: “I appreciate that all of you are here on time because I won’t have to repeat the instructions.” I tell them when I genuinely admire their qualities and talents: “I admire your perseverance in making up your work after your long absence.” While “I’m proud of you” implies that my students should work to please me, “I admire” tells them them have qualities I respect.

Of course, when a class accomplishes a particularly challenging task or is exceptionally mature, kind, and resilient, I can’t resist telling them I’m proud. Also, for those students who are feeling ungrounded, insecure, or unworthy, an authentic “I’m proud of you” might be just what they need the most. In those cases, the words can carry much more than our pride. They can mean that our students are seen, valued, and supported.

I believe our praise should not position the teacher at the center—as bestower of approval or disapproval. Instead, our feedback should be used as a tool to cultivate in our students a healthy self-awareness and self-trust.