

FACILITATIVE TALK:

Shaping a Culture of Professional Learning Over Time

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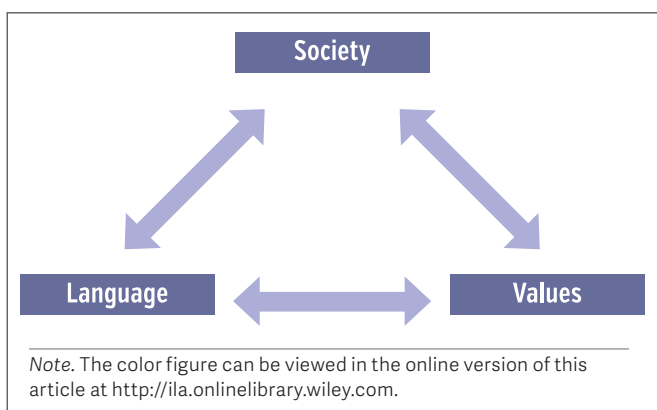
The way we speak to each other is often so deeply ingrained as to be unconscious. We often use language automatically, without any thought: “How are you?” “Great job!” “No problem.” “I’m all set.” “Go for it!” Yet, the language we use matters. It has everything to do with what we believe; what we learn; how we perceive ourselves, events, and other people; how we affect other people; and how we work and live together.

Think about the many ways that people use a common language to shape their societies—not only large societies but also smaller communities, such as athletic teams and clubs, and workplace communities. Language is created by society, incorporating social values, and in turn, language influences the values of that society (see Figure 1). Language, and the way we use it to represent ideas, people, places, events, and experiences, shapes our thinking and our values and influences the identities of others.

Language and the School Community

Schools and classrooms are minisocieties: communities of people working together for a shared purpose. Learning is fundamentally social, and the way people develop in communities becomes the foundation of their social, emotional, and intellectual growth (Johnston et al., 2020). These learning communities often develop a common language over time, one that reflects and shapes the values of that community. You can have a clearly articulated set

Figure 1
Relation Among Society, Values, and Language



of values and beliefs about literacy teaching and learning or an aspirational mission for your school, but if that is not supported by the language you use in your interactions, you won’t achieve your goals.

We have long known the importance of teachers’ facilitative talk in instructional settings as it supports students’ agency, identities, and problem-solving abilities as learners. A precise, timely prompt by a teacher can create a temporary scaffold that supports students’ new understandings and influences their stance toward learning. A teacher’s use of carefully selected language can facilitate students’ engagement, independence, self-efficacy, self-respect, and sense of being a valued member of an equitable, inclusive community. The way teachers talk to students—the words they use and the way they use them—also influences the culture of the school, as well as an understanding of what is valued within that culture.

The language that educators, particularly coaches, principals, and teacher leaders, use when interacting with one another and that teachers use with one another has a similar effect on professional growth and the culture of adult learning in the school. Like the teacher with the student, the school leader plays a critical role in mediating teachers’ views of themselves and their own professional learning. When school leaders develop and refine their language and communication skills, they empower teachers to share their unique perspectives, develop their expertise, and contribute to the learning of their colleagues. As a school leader, your goal is not to manipulate teachers to do what you want but rather to engage them in genuine inquiry that allows you to agree on and work toward your common goals of achieving equitable outcomes for all students.

When used effectively, language can facilitate a culture of collaboration, inclusiveness, problem solving, self-reflection, agency, and analytic thinking. By changing the conversations in the culture, we change the culture. By working on changing the culture, we change the conversations. Even small changes in how colleagues speak to each other can have a significant impact on teachers’ professional growth, which in turn increases their expertise and effectiveness in the classroom and throughout the school community.

In recognition of the powerful role that language plays in teacher growth, we chose to focus this column on the interactions that take place during professional learning between school leaders and the teachers they support (although there are also many implications for the language that teachers use with one another). We define school leaders as the educators in the system who have a responsibility for supporting the professional expertise of the members of a team. School leaders include literacy coaches, instructional coaches, principals, and the growing number of teachers who engage in acts of leadership (Fountas & Pinnell, 2020). We invite you to imagine what would happen if school leaders consistently and consciously use precise, supportive, facilitative talk that, over time, permeates and shapes the school culture. Whereas the use of this language is conscious at first, it becomes internalized and largely unconscious over time. Your school becomes a place where people use and understand a common language that nudges everyone toward deeper thinking and reflection.

What Are the Characteristics of Facilitative Talk?

Like the children they teach, teachers grow into the intellectual life that surrounds them in the school (Vygotsky, 1978). In a culture that values professional learning and inquiry, teachers actively engage in independent and collaborative learning. When interacting with teachers, your use of language parallels that of teachers as they support the learning of students. The language rests on the principle that an experienced leader—in this case, you—places the learner—in this case, the teacher—on the edge of present understandings and provides a scaffold that allows expansion and growth. As a school leader, your choice of language positions the teacher as a co-learner who is a co-structor and co-problem solver with a shared sense of ownership and commitment to the values of the school. It shapes the teachers' identities as vital, contributing members of the school team, responsible for their own professional learning and supporting the learning of colleagues.

Your goal is not to get your colleagues to do what you want or think they should do. Rather, your goal is to think together about your school's common values and beliefs about literacy learning and the practices that lead to improved student outcomes. Conversations that support this goal are rooted in data or evidence from student learning that reveals inequity and guides teachers' instruction and decision making. This requires putting aside your own agendas, biases, or preconceived notions and showing genuine interest in the thinking and diverse perspectives of others. Your humility, transparency, and empathy, as well as your self-awareness, will go a long way in building trust and respect.

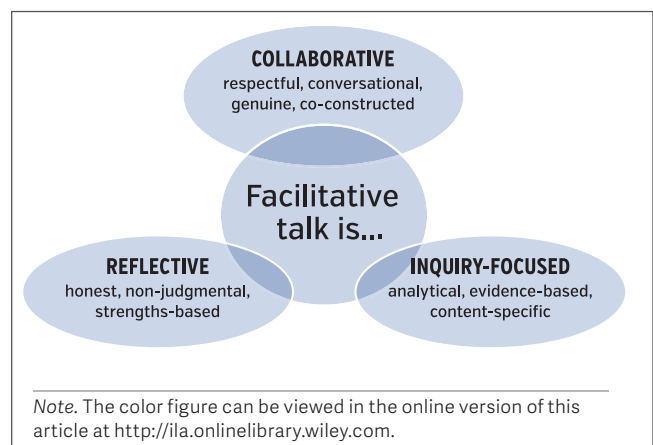
We describe the kind of talk that both fosters and grows out of this collaborative environment as facilitative, in that it facilitates thinking by the teacher that leads to greater expertise and effectiveness in the classroom. We believe that the intentional and skilled facilitation of professional conversations by school leaders is the surest way to promote and sustain the learning and expertise of teachers. Some key characteristics of facilitative talk are shown in Figure 2.

Collaborative

Facilitative talk fosters collaborative thinking. Your success requires harnessing and developing the expertise and leadership of teachers. This challenge requires letting go of a strict top-down hierarchy and nurturing and amplifying teachers' voices in educating students. A trusting relationship between you and your colleagues goes a long way toward the development of an aligned educator team (Fountas & Pinnell, in press). Teachers who feel valued and trusted are more likely to take risks and take on new skills and understandings.

Interactions using language that is constructive and collegial are at the heart of creating teacher self-efficacy—the belief that one can learn and grow more competent over time. A truly collaborative interaction is **conversational** and invites multiple perspectives. There is give-and-take; both you and the teacher listen to understand, offer information, and learn from each other. Regardless of their role, pairs or small groups of colleagues think together and dig deep into the acts of teaching and learning in pursuit of improved outcomes for all students. A tone of **respect** and tentativeness permeates the interaction. No one dominates. You pause to listen carefully and with commitment to the teacher, rather than simply waiting for another opportunity to speak, because a teacher's talk reveals what she currently believes and understands. By listening and thinking together, you discover

Figure 2
Characteristics of Facilitative Talk



what drives a teacher's decisions and instructional moves. The conversation is **genuine** and organic, not artificial or formulaic, nor constrained by a standardized set of rituals. Participants talk about what they have seen (or will see) and express their expectations. They talk about what is real and important to their work and arrive at **co-constructed** understandings.

Inquiry-Focused

Facilitative talk promotes genuine inquiry. Lindfors (1999) described inquiry as “a language act in which one attempts to elicit another's help in going beyond his or her present understanding” (p. ix). Educators wonder and think together, focusing on investigating and problem solving using the literacy behaviors of real students within an **instructional context**. The goal for both individuals is to learn more about responsive teaching, that is, teaching that is based on the detailed knowledge of individual students. You use **evidence**—quantitative data [e.g., accuracy scores or instructional levels], qualitative data [systematic observational data, e.g., student writing and teacher observational notes], and both together [e.g., a Benchmark Assessment conference or ongoing running records]. You make clear, descriptive statements using the evidence to ground your conclusions. Both the leader and the individual receiving support engage in **analysis** of the data and the effects of teaching to determine evidence of learning or confusion on the part of the student. The analysis leads to generative thinking; practices that prove to have positive effects on student learning are applied to future teaching.

Reflective

Facilitative talk supports self-reflection and growth—not assessment or judgment in an effort to fix a lesson—by promoting **honest** analysis on the part of the learner. The lesson is an example from which both you and the teacher can think together and reflect in order to expand knowledge of teaching and learning. Your goal is to gain as much information as possible about what the teacher understands and believes. Listening to better understand the teacher's perspectives and strengths is an important part of fostering self-reflection, as is using silence to give space and time for reflection and processing. You assume that the teacher is competent and actively **identify strengths** on which the teacher can build. In other words, your language communicates a belief that the teacher's knowledge, experience, and unique perspectives are assets. When the teacher feels like your questions are meant to show her lack of expertise, you erode trust. Instead of dead-end phrases that discourage self-reflection and growth, such as “Good lesson” or “You should have,” you invite deeper, **nonjudgmental** thinking with language such as “Would you like to talk about...?” and “Can you share your thinking about...?” Asking authentic, focused, and open-ended questions

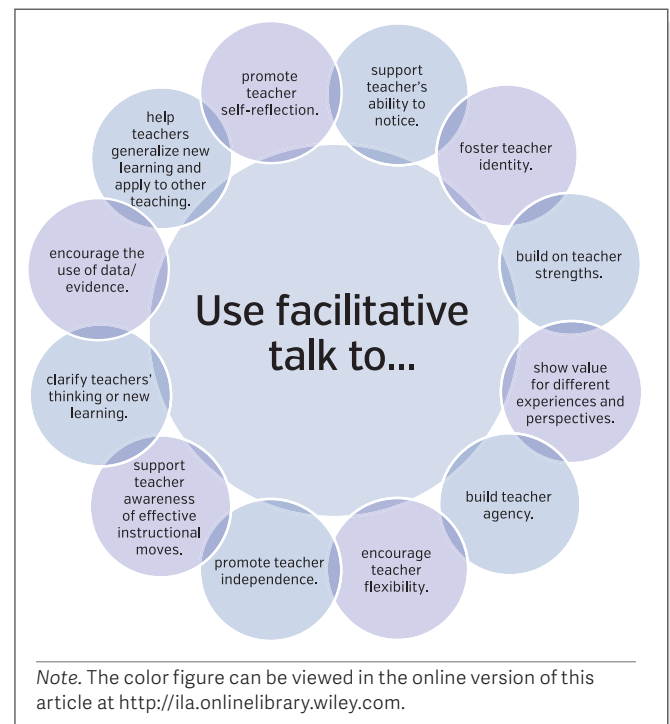
rather than testing the teacher encourages thoughtful response and a growth mind-set.

Facilitative talk among educators does not become the norm in a school quickly or without conscious effort. Facilitative language develops over time, one conversation at a time, as members of the school community work and learn together. Meaningful conversations about teaching and learning rest on the values and vision shared by all educators in the school and require a common understanding of the work that educators are doing together. Facilitative talk emerges from the cumulative effects of hundreds of conversations, starting with the language you take on and use with other school leaders and with the teachers you support. Let's take a look at some of the ways that facilitative talk can help shape teacher learning and growth.

What Are the Goals of Facilitative Talk?

Purposeful facilitative talk leads to many positive outcomes (see Figure 3). Our belief is that school leaders in any role are most effective and impactful when they position themselves as a colleague and take a coaching stance, supporting and encouraging each teacher's potential. Teachers respond to a coach who is a collearner, who guides collaborative inquiry, builds knowledge collaboratively, looks for and interprets evidence, and fosters a

Figure 3
Goals of Facilitative Talk



sense of agency. Your choice of language shapes the thinking of every educator in the school and communicates what you value as a school leader. Consider the impact on the culture if the coach is always the giver of knowledge and the teacher is always the receiver. Consider the impact if the coach asks a question and already knows the answer. When the teacher answers, the coach responds by saying, “Correct” or “Good,” implying that the coach’s job is to evaluate and that the teacher’s job is simply to produce the right answer. Even a positive response might limit teacher learning, when the more important goal is to expand it. A judgmental stance conditions the teacher to be dependent on the coach for approval, leading to a loss of self-confidence and agency. Instead, provide the space for teachers to bring their own valuable perspectives and delve into their own authentic questions about teaching and learning so they can grapple with real issues, ponder their challenges, and hypothesize possible alternatives. When you view the coaching conversation as a partnership of co-inquirers, both the coach and the teacher gain the expertise, experience, and thinking of the other, and both are enriched by the experience.

Facilitative Talk in Action

Let’s look at some examples of the kind of language that can promote an authentic, inclusive, collaborative stance. Figure 4 lists outcomes that you may be working to bring about and a sampling of language you might use to support each one. Many of the examples, when used in a genuine way during a collegial discussion, simultaneously support multiple outcomes. All of the examples contribute to the larger goal of language that fosters inclusivity, collegiality, and colearning. You might hear this kind of talk during formal interactions, such as one-on-one coaching, cluster coaching, inquiry groups, professional workshops, supervisory sessions, data meetings, grade-level meetings, and walk-throughs. You can also find opportunities to include the examples in informal encounters throughout the day: collegial conversations in the staff room, in staff meetings, before and after school, and in informal classroom observations. When both formal and informal structures include skilled facilitative talk by a leader, teachers learn more and view themselves as growing professionals in a collaborative community of learners.

Notice that in our earlier examples, there are no phrases such as “good job,” “you should have,” “I would have,” or “that was very effective.” Praise is a clear message that you, as the leader or coach, are the expert and have the right to judge and therefore the right to condemn. It does not move the learner forward. Thoughtful consideration of the teacher’s work communicates that he is a competent thinker and problem solver and that you are a colearner. That in itself builds agency. What you notice is important

in the conversation, but what the teacher notices is even more important.

We have provided a lot of language as examples you might use. Pausing and waiting are of equal value. All of us have the tendency to rush in to fill the silence, but when you are silent, you slow things down and give the teacher time to process. The person who does most of the talking is doing the thinking, so wait time can be productive indeed. Effective coaches listen and watch for evidence that the teacher is taking on new information. Notice your colleagues’ uptake or nonverbal feedback so as not to overwhelm and shut the learning down. Some individuals need a “one step at a time” approach; as long as they are moving forward and see themselves as learners, there will be continuous movement toward the goal.

Referring to a set of common values and beliefs about literacy learning in the school and a document that identifies curricular goals can keep conversations centered and educators working toward common outcomes. You may want to take some time to use tools such as *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum: A Tool for Assessment, Planning, and Teaching* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), *Fountas & Pinnell Prompting Guide, Part 1, for Oral Reading and Early Writing* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016a), or *Fountas & Pinnell Prompting Guide, Part 2, for Comprehension: Thinking, Talking, and Writing* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016b). Such tools bring a third eye to the conversation because the coach and teacher can use them together to contemplate possibilities and opportunities. As you continue the journey of reflection, consider your own stance as a school leader and how others perceive you, as well as any implicit biases you may have that affect the way you see yourself, the way you see others, and the way you lead. Your stance and how you perceive yourself as a leader are reflected in your language, and your language will reveal your stance. We offer several questions to consider as you continue the journey of reflection in your school community (see Figure 5).

Envisioning a Culture of Collaborative Learning

Paying purposeful, conscious attention to the use of language in teacher–student and school leader–teacher interactions will be part of any culture of teamwork and professional learning. The goal is growing expertise and more effective teaching, and your language as a school leader will not only reflect this growth but also sustain it. Consider this advice from a great thinker:

Carefully watch your thoughts, for they become your words. Manage and watch your words, for they will become your actions. Consider and judge your actions, for they have become your habits. Acknowledge and watch your habits, for they shall become your values. Understand

Figure 4
Examples of Facilitative Talk to Support Professional Learning

Goals	Examples of Language	
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do you want to think about together today? ▪ How can I be helpful? ▪ How can I help you think about that? ▪ Do you want to talk more about that? ▪ What's on your mind? ▪ Can you help me understand? ▪ Why do you think that? ▪ So it seems like _____. ▪ I was wondering _____. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What was your thinking? ▪ I agree with your thinking that _____. ▪ What's getting in the way of the students' (fluency, efficient word analysis, voice in writing, etc)? ▪ Is there anything else you want to talk about? ▪ What I am hearing you say is _____. ▪ As I listen to you, I am hearing three big issues... ▪ It sounds like you are saying _____. Is that correct? ▪ Let me summarize what I am hearing that really matters to you.
Support Ability to Notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What were you noticing? ▪ Here's what I saw: _____. Were you seeing the same? ▪ Where did the lesson seem long? ▪ I took some notes to help me remember; I think I have that down. ▪ You asked me to _____. Here's what I saw/heard. ▪ What did you notice about the student's body language? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You seemed pleased when/surprised by _____. ▪ What made you think you were not clear? ▪ What did you see/hear the children do/say that made you think that? ▪ I noticed _____. ▪ I could see that _____. ▪ What were surprises for you today? ▪ What voices were not part of the discussion?
Foster Teacher Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You must be feeling good about that. ▪ Where do you see yourself taking a risk? ▪ You must be feeling like you got a shift in the child's processing. ▪ What new teaching moves are you going to try? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What have you learned that you want to try with your next lesson? ▪ Might you want to write about that and share it with your colleagues as an article or blog? ▪ How did your experiences/perspectives influence your teaching decisions?
Build on Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are you thinking is going well in your teaching of _____? ▪ What have you taught your students how to do as readers/writers? ▪ How has your teaching of _____ been going? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are you feeling are your strengths in teaching _____? (e.g. guided reading lessons) ▪ I noticed that you _____. It seemed to support _____. ▪ Talk about teaching decisions that you felt were effective with your students today.
Show Value for Different Experiences and Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How are you using information about the children's cultures (histories, languages) in your teaching? ▪ How have you considered the interests of these students when _____? ▪ How are you building on the richness of the experiences you and your students bring? ▪ How are you promoting the sharing of varied perspectives? ▪ Would you like for me to observe particular children for evidence of their active participation (understanding, engagement)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Let's talk about some ways to include more voices during discussions. ▪ Which students may need something extra or different? ▪ Talk about how you are planning adjustments to the lesson to support English learners. ▪ What is your thinking about how these texts represent diverse peoples accurately and positively? ▪ Let's look together at the texts you have read aloud to the students. How do these texts provide opportunities for students to see themselves and their diverse world?
Build Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What did you think when you saw _____? ▪ How did you figure that out? ▪ Where do you want to focus your teaching today? ▪ Where will you find evidence of _____? ▪ So, given what you know about the students as readers/writers, _____? ▪ What were you hoping for at that point? ▪ What do you think would happen if _____? ▪ Where do you think the children might have some difficulty processing the text? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Talk about your teaching decisions in the lesson today. ▪ You expressed concern about _____. Now what are you thinking? ▪ And what else could you try? ▪ What's the real challenge for you? And what else is a real challenge? ▪ What feels effective in your teaching? And what else? ▪ What new thinking do you want to try out?

(continued)

Figure 4
Examples of Facilitative Talk to Support Professional Learning (Continued)

Goals	Examples of Language	
Encourage Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ That was your plan, but what changed your thinking? ▪ How else might you have done that? ▪ What else were you thinking when you observed _____? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When you saw _____, what choices did you have? ▪ If you decided _____, how might that have been different? ▪ What other decision might you have made?
Promote Teacher Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are you planning to try next? ▪ What professional resource could help you with that? ▪ What information about the students could help you think about that? ▪ How are you thinking of going about that? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is your plan? ▪ What are you thinking will be the best decision? ▪ What information will you need to make a plan? ▪ Can you suggest what else would be helpful for us to talk about?
Support Awareness of Effective Instructional Moves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If you _____, what do you think the students would have done? ▪ It seemed helpful to the children when _____. ▪ What made you think you were not clear? ▪ I noticed that _____. How effective did you think that was in helping the children _____? ▪ Where did the lesson feel long? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What went well in your teaching today? Were there aspects you are now thinking about differently? ▪ What did the children learn how to do as readers/writers? ▪ Where do you think you could have tightened the lesson? ▪ Where did you feel your teaching was most effective? ▪ Where did you feel like things weren't going as you wanted? What are your insights about that?
Clarify Thinking or New Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do you mean by that? ▪ Can you say that another way? ▪ Talk more about what you mean. ▪ I heard you say _____. ▪ So, you're feeling _____. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You're noticing that _____. ▪ In other words, _____. ▪ So you're saying that _____. ▪ You're suggesting that _____.
Encourage the Use of Data/Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What information about your students did you use in your planning? ▪ What evidence did you find most useful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What shifts in reading/writing were you able to observe? How did you know? ▪ Were you concerned that any biases were reflected in your view/use of the data/evidence? ▪ Did you notice any patterns in the data or evidence that may indicate inequity?
Help Generalize New Learning and Apply to Other Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will our talk today about these students influence your work with other readers/writers? ▪ How will this discussion about your students as reader/writers influence your teaching of reading/writing? ▪ How will your work with these students as writers inform your work with them in reading? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What new insights do you have that will help you with other students? ▪ What are your most useful insights from today's teaching? ▪ How will you apply today's thinking to future teaching?
Promote Self-Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why do you think the children were able to figure that out? ▪ What did you do that helped them be able to read/write that way? ▪ What challenges are you finding in the teaching of reading/writing? ▪ How have you tried to address those? What did you learn? ▪ Where were you feeling that your teaching was most effective today? ▪ Where in your teaching were you feeling challenged to make the best decision? ▪ Given how the children responded, what is your thinking now? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ So what did you learn from your teaching today? ▪ What did you learn that you want to share with your colleagues? ▪ And what else is challenging for you? ▪ What else do you want to talk about? ▪ What else do you want to think about? ▪ What would you like to think about together? ▪ What do you want to remember? ▪ What are some explicit and implicit biases that you are becoming more aware of as an educator? ▪ What was most useful for you in our time together?

and embrace your values, for they become your destiny.
[Mahatma Gandhi]

As you take on more productive language, consider your choice of words in relation to the experiences, perspectives, and levels of expertise of each person with whom you engage, including recognizing racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural differences. This intentionality can feel awkward at first, but it's the very process of slowing down and considering your language that leads to new thinking. These changes do not happen overnight. Focus on maintaining a listening and learning stance, and on steady growth and improvement, not on immediate results. Think of your school culture as continuously improving, ever evolving, never arriving. The goal is to create and strengthen a culture of collaborative professionalism that leads to positive social, emotional, and intellectual outcomes for your students. Envision the collaborative culture that you and your team of educators want to promote. By consciously working toward productive facilitative language between teachers and students and among the adult colleagues who form your school community, you have the potential of shaping the culture of the school over time as the new language becomes a natural, integral part of all of your interactions.

Everyone within the school community can take on new facilitative language over time. As the school leader, your job is to lead the way. Look forward in your thinking and position yourself as a thinking partner and problem solver who will expand your

expectations day by day, month by month. All members of the school community can be a constant source of inspiration and support for one another, and the shared facilitative language of the community will reflect these collaborative, collegial values. In this way, your school culture and values are continuously shaping the language you use, and the language, in turn, will reflect and reinforce what is important to you as a learning community. This relation between facilitative language and community offers powerful opportunities for you to shape a culture of shared leadership, teamwork, and professional learning over time.

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Figure 5 Questions for Reflection

- How do you perceive yourself as a leader? How do others perceive you?
- How does your language reflect your stance?
- Does the culture of your school create a high level of trust in observing and talking together about teaching and learning?
- How do learners in your school gain experience and develop expertise in having skilled, facilitative conversations? What opportunities do they have for professional learning?
- How do school leaders—coaches, principals, mentors, teacher leaders—view their roles in supporting professional learning?
- How do teachers view their roles in professional learning?
- What documents and resources describe the common values and expectations for the learning opportunities of students? How do educators use the documents and resources as the foundation of their work?

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