

Think Twice Before You Speak: Using effective praise in the early childhood and university setting

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Abstract

Most educators agree that students need supportive environments at any academic level. Well meaning educators have been taught to consider praise to aid in fostering self esteem, student achievement, and motivation for learning. In spite of research showing the use of traditional praise as counterproductive, teachers continue to use ineffective praise within their classrooms.

A study was conducted with early childhood and university, teacher education students revealing similar findings for both age groups. The implementation of effective praise produced greater behavioral gains than within the group receiving traditional praise.

Educators need to be given the knowledge and supporting research to make praise more effective within their classrooms. Within this session, the authors will identify the problem, share current research as well as data from their study, and discuss implications for educators.

Keywords: Effective Praise, Higher Education, Early Childhood, Student Achievement, Student Motivation

Introduction

Educators agree that students at any academic level need supportive environments. Although research states that using praise may be counterproductive to this effort, teachers continue to utilize ineffective praise within practice. Well-meaning educators have been taught to consider self-image and esteem as well as student achievement and motivation for learning. Many offer positive reinforcement in the form of verbal praise in order to progress toward these goals. However, research states some common uses of praise have negative effects in some or all of these areas. Teachers need to be given the knowledge to become more effective and consistent with the goals and standards of appropriate early childhood development.

Brophy (1981) defined praise as "to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration." There are many problems with its use within the classroom setting including its use to aid in student motivation, self esteem and classroom management. Statements beginning with the phrase, "I like the way," place the onus for the behavior on the instructor. Words such as "great" or "good job" are not specific. Young children do not always have the interest to please their teachers. As they age, this motivation greatly diminishes. Esler (1983) revealed that correlations between teachers' rates of praise and students' learning gains are at times negative. When correlations are positive, they are most often too low to be considered significant.

Many educators consider praise to be an important component of their classroom management system. Kounin (1970) found that teachers' use of praise did not play a role in effective classroom management. The ability to maintain an appropriate momentum of classroom instruction and activities was the most effective classroom management variable. Brophy (1981) discovered using praise as a systematic reinforcer within classrooms to be impractical. His research disclosed much teacher praise to be non-deliberate reinforcement elicited by students.

Educators utilize praise to promote student self esteem. Studies have shown some statements of praise to lower students' confidence in themselves. Rowe (1974) found that praise in the traditional sense lowered students' confidence as well as their verbal participation. Further, students exhibited many characteristics including doubtful tone during responses and low participation risk-taking which are indicative to low self esteem. They also had a higher incidence of looking to the teacher for reinforcement -- answers, approval, and disapproval.

Praise has also been used within classrooms to foster student motivation when it has been actually found to be a weak form of reinforcement. Green and Lepper (1974) learned that once teachers began praising preschool children for engaging in an activity, the children became less motivated to do the activity. Praise has also been found to lessen self-motivation and cause children to become reward-dependent (Martin, 1977; Stringer and Hurt, 1981). Meyer (1979) discovered praise led recipients to have low expectations of success at difficult tasks which decreased the risk taking and personal task intensity.

Ineffective praise can stifle students' natural curiosity and desire to learn by focusing their attention on extrinsic rewards rather than the intrinsic rewards that come from the task itself (Brophy, 1981). Epstein (2003) states,

Use encouragement rather than praise. Another way to support

planning is to avoid praising children's ideas. If you say "great idea" on one day or to one child, you may inadvertently convey disapproval if you forget to say those words to another child or on the following day. Praise also tends to end the conversation, cutting off the possibilities for children to elaborate their plans. Instead, use the other strategies listed here—listening, asking questions, commenting, recording their ideas—to encourage children to think about and follow through on their intentions.

Teachers not only need the research knowledge to assist them with the use of effective classroom encouragement, but they also need the tools needed to help with delivery. Jane Bluestein (2004) offers a quick, effective guide. She suggests:

- Use positive reinforcement to strengthen already existing behaviors
- Watch for a tendency to praise. These statements can appear manipulative to students.
- Avoid praising one child to motivate others.
- Avoid using teacher approval as a means to reinforce desired behavior. Use behaviors such as a wink, smile, touch, to indicate that you are pleased.
- Phrase reinforcements as affirmations or acknowledgments
- Describe desirable behaviors in specific terms
- Look for the positive! (81)

Based on the review of the relevant literature it was hypothesized that effective praise needs to be addressed at all levels. This study examines the impact effective praise has on graduate early childhood and elementary teacher education students' attitudes and performance. Specifically, the study addressed the following research question: What is the effect of praise within a graduate early childhood course?

Methods

Beginning the winter of 2006, this study was initiated. It was further theorized that if our graduate students, mostly inservice teachers, were placed in a situation where they were not only given information about effective praise but also receiving various forms of praise, they would have a better understanding of its effectiveness for use within their classrooms.

One hundred thirteen graduate students within five course sections enrolled in a Midwestern university early childhood or elementary course were included in the study. The study was concluded within a one-year period of time. Within the semester time frame, half of the students enrolled within each course were randomly selected to receive effective or non-effective feedback on course assignments submitted to their instructor. The effective feedback consisted of specific statements addressing their performance. This included comments regarding each point from the assignment rubric. The other half received brief, non-effective feedback such as "Great work" or "Super job."

Using a Likert scale and open ended responses, students were asked their thoughts and feelings about the assignment and course as well as the feedback they had received.

Specifically they were asked questions dealing with motivation, self esteem, management of the course, and quality of the instructor.

Near the close of the semester, students were assigned to analyze literature which addressed the use of effective and non-effective praise in the classroom setting. The instructor discussed the study with all students and gave those students who had received the non-effective feedback their formal assignment sheets. These sheets contained the specific, effective praise addressing each rubric point given to the effective praise group. Students discussed their thoughts and feelings about the feedback and class and related it to their assigned literature as well as their performance within their own classrooms. The students' narrative comments are found within Table 1.

Data Analysis

The preliminary data was drawn from the surveys of 113 students. The students ranked their responses to questions about motivation, self esteem, management of the course, and quality of the instructor using a four-point Likert scale and were given space to provide open-ended responses.

Weighted averages were calculated for the student's responses from each assessment. Table 1 shows the preliminary data for each of the categories. A correlation was completed between the four weighted totals: There was a strong correlation of .972 between effective praise and student motivation. There was a strong correlation of .941 between effective praise and self esteem. There was a strong correlation of .952 between effective praise and course management. There was a strong correlation of .931 between effective praise and instructor effectiveness.

Discussion

The analysis supported the hypothesis that effective praise needs to be implemented at various levels. The analysis shows that there is a strong relationship between effective praise and student motivation, self-esteem, course management, and instructor effectiveness. The student comments (Appendix) support the analysis of the preliminary survey data. This study indicates that the use of effective praise in the university graduate-level setting is a powerful learning intervention.

Limitations

The results from this study are based on self-reporting data. The students reported hypothetical data points which are not based on observed data. Tracking these teachers within a longitudinal study to seek evidence of actual use of feedback within their classrooms may allow for greater confirmed data.

This study did utilize a control group and the subjects were randomized in their selection process. The authors felt that each student should be afforded the highest level of instruction within the courses and given appropriate feedback. They were all given effective feedback on every assignment by the completion of the course.

Conclusion and Implications

The reviewed literature suggests that effective praise is not being widely used. Educators need to be given the information about the impact of effective and non-effective praise as well as tools needed to utilize effective praise within their classrooms. Institutions at all levels need to take a critical look at their programs to evaluate the use of feedback and the implications to students' motivation and performance.

One of the participant responses sums up the importance of effective praise. This student speaks to the effective praise she had received within her graduate-level course: "I am glad to get specific feedback. I have worked hard and feel that my professor values my efforts. It makes me want to try my hardest to do the best I can on the remainder of the assignments. It is making me also see that I am not always giving this gift to my students, and I need to try harder to be sure to do this."

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Appendix

Students' Narrative Comments

In addition to responding to the questions dealing with motivation, self esteem, management and instructor effectiveness, graduate students were given the opportunity to give open-ended comments.

The following comments were written by students within the effective praise group:

- “I am glad to get specific feedback. I have worked hard and feel that my professor values my efforts. It makes me want to try my hardest to do the best I can on the remainder of the assignments. It is making me also see that I am not always giving this gift to my students, and I need to try harder to be sure to do this.”
- “I never knew getting words on my assignments would be important to me. Now that I'm thinking of it, it really makes a difference as to how I feel about my work and how hard I try on my next assignments. When a professor takes the time to give strong feedback, that means a lot. I need to be sure to do the same with my little ones at school.”
- “As a teacher I try to encourage my students to do the best that they possibly can. I try to tell them in more than one or two sentences that they are doing a great job or keep up the good work. I know when I give them this positive feedback that is encouraging them to do their best and also to achieve something that they think they can't. It is important as a teacher to make or students feel like the best. My professor is modeling this for me, and it is good to feel first hand.”
- “I give my students both short and long feedback. On daily assignments, I write quick notes, stars, smiles, stickers, redos, this wasn't your best work, etc. On writing assignments, I give them a form with my 2 stars and my 2 wishes. I'm seeing how I am feeling about the feedback I am getting, so I'm going to give more to my students.”
- “The best part of feedback is learning from mistakes and seeing what I did right. Did my work express my effort? Did my point get made? Even if it takes a few extra days to grade the papers, I think there should always be constructive comments attached and something positive to acknowledge the efforts.”
- “I believe that it is simply human nature to crave praise from others. Indeed, we all like to hear that others are noticing our hardwork, triumphs and achievements; however, in most cases we simply are doing the work solely for the betterment of ourselves or just because it is our responsibility.”
- “As a student, I complete tasks regularly because I want to further my education and be the best professional that I can possibly be. Although, my education is for "me", I still like to get feedback from my instructors. I like to get positive notes so I know I am headed in the right direction, and I like to receive constructive criticism because it gives me ideas on how I can improve my work and it can direct my thinking. When an instructor takes the time to evaluate my work, it shows that he or she values who I am and the work that I produce. Now, I do not think that professor needs to spend

hours grading each assignment; however, I do appreciate the time and efforts that are taken to grade those major assignments.”

- “Now, as an elementary school teacher, I believe that it is essential to give children immediate feedback. At a young age, children need to see that teachers value their work and thoughts, and that we appreciate all the hard work that they put in. Moreover, the children need to be guided in their learning experiences, and I think that feedback is one of the ways in which we can do this.”
- “Giving students feedback on their performance is more than grades. As an elementary art teacher I am not required to give my students grades and I know it is important to give them each feedback time with their project. I should write more. I feel it is so important to put on an art show at my school each year. Every student in the whole school gets at least one piece of art work in the show. The students get such a thrill from seeing their art work hanging in the show. I try to hang up art work all year long. This gives students more motivation to try their best. I will find the time to give the students some kind of feedback especially since I do not give grades. I see how important it is now.”
- “As a student, I like to know how I am doing. On a large assignment, I like more than a 1 or 2 word answer. I like the instructor to tell me what I did well, and where I can make improvements. On smaller assignments, a quick response is fine. As a teacher, I like to give me students feedback right away. Most of the time, on morning work I will give a word, smile, sticker, or some other "quick" response. When it comes to their writing or other subjects, I like to let them know how they are doing. I will take the time to either have a conference, or write it out with more details.”
- “I have had a few teachers who only wrote a grade or a few words. I never really thought much about it but it affected how I felt about the course and them. I have had several teachers here who have given very thought provoking responses. I could tell that they had actually thought about what I had written. I loved reading their comments and suggestions!”
- “As a third grade teacher, I don't give many long assignments. I do take time to read what students have written in their journals. I try to provide more than just a few words. Next year I am going to let the students select one writing assignment each month for me to respond to in writing at length. I frequently have author share time so that they can read something to the class. Then we allow for 3 student comments and something from me.”
- “I teach 2nd grade and some of my students don't read as well as others. I end up writing something brief on their work. I can now see how this might not the right approach. I used to think a one word remark like "Great" or two words such as "please re-do" were sufficient. I should take a few minutes to talk with the student to offer better feedback. If I want a parent to understand in depth what my concerns are with the childs work, I would call his/her parent and have personal conversation with them. I do remember when I was in grade school, teachers using rubber stamps with messages on them. The boy that sat behind me used to get a sad face that said "poor work" all the time(I know this because he sat behind me and we always had to pass papers behind us in the row)I cannot imagine how this effected the young boy. We couldn't have been much older then 2nd grade. In cases such as these I definitely

think a personal conversation with encouraging words rather than a negative message from a rubber stamp would be better.”

- “Some of the professors here are really good about giving feedback. It is a good way to let the students know their strengths and weaknesses, rather than slapping just a grade on paper. In my own classroom, I give feedback and rubrics on projects that they do, along with books that they write. They enjoy reading the feedback because it is individualized, rather than receiving feedback as a whole group.”
- “I like knowing how I am specifically doing. How else am I going to learn and improve? I wish I would have thought about this with my own classroom. I thought it was OK to give short responses. I can see how it’s not.”

The following comments were written by students within the non-effective praise group:

- “As a student, I don’t mind the one or two word comments next to the paragraph or sentence that is good. If there is something that I did wrong, then I like the more specific feedback. I am not looking at my classroom, and I do this. I am seeing how my students might think I’m slacking or it might affect their motivation.”
- “As a student I would feel as if my instructor did not value all the time and effort that I had put into the project that I was doing. As a student I like to know exactly how I am doing and sometimes one or two sentences is not enough. I work hard on everything that I did because I want to show my professor the best quality work that I can do. Sometimes I get so stressed out because I don't know how I am doing. I feel that way when I have classes that meet half in class and half on blackboard. I feel that I am doing well but I have not received any feedback from the professor so I really don't know. I know if I feel this way just imagine the way a student in our classrooms feels. We as educators need to give more than one or two sentence comments.”
- “I do not even know if my professor even read the paper. It might make me feel less inclined to work so hard next time. It is important to know my teacher's thoughts on my work, and I look forward to her responses. I am not looking for red ink (ha, ha). I appreciate any input that my teacher may give me. I didn’t realize that was so important to me, and I feel kind of silly about it. My students are looking for immediate feedback in regards to their work completed. I do believe it is as important for myself as an educator to acknowledge my students work and give lots of praise as well as commenting on their performance. I also like to build my students self esteem on a daily basis.”
- “Feedback to your students is crucial, especially in elementary school. When I give students feedback to their writing I have a checklist and a comment section. I always write in the comment section something like "I like how..." to instill confidence in them. When I give them "constructive criticism" I do this face to face in our conference meetings. Sometimes when students are unsure of something and they make mistakes, the last thing they want to do is read about it. Conferences help with that dilemma because I can joke around and model it for them.”
- “Without feedback, you are hindering your students' growth and not only frustrating them, but also you! Does that make sense? I hope so!”

- “I think everyone likes to have validation for the work they accomplished. If I put weeks into a paper and received nothing more than a "good job", I would be disappointed and wonder if anyone even really bothered to read it.”
- “I think that in professional level classes such as these, the prompt one or two word responses are appropriate. If I have questions about what was written I generally go and ask. Time is precious. I would feel more valued as a student however to receive more feedback. I am self-motivated, so I’m not as affected. I can see how my students would be though.”
- “I spend the time and put in the energy to do good work on projects, papers, etc. and like to receive feedback of more than just a few words. For a fill in worksheet, a short phrase is enough, yet for those papers and projects that take the time at home or in school, students need more than a simple good job. A sentence or two outlining what they did well and any areas for improvement would contribute to the success that a student would feel regarding their work.”
- “It shouldn’t matter what my instructor puts on my paper. I should be able to not be affected by it. I have found that I am and now know that I need to be sure to do this with my students.”
- “I can see how I need to be better at giving specific feedback to my kids at school. We should all do this at any level for many reasons.”
- “Positive reinforcement is a good thing but I can see how it needs to be specific. I don’t really give an idea to my students how they are doing if I put a one or two word grade on their assignment.”

