

Praise: What Does the Literature Say? What Are the Implications for Teachers?

Miriam Ferguson

Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour, Cluster 18, Bay of Plenty



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the literature in the area of praise. It considers definitions of praise, types of praise and the effects of praise on learning and behaviour, particularly as it relates to motivation. The evidence base for effective praise is discussed and recommendations for classroom practice are highlighted.

Research paper

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PRAISE

The use of praise in learning has a long history. As early as the 12th century it was reported that children were awarded figs and honey in the teaching of the Torah. Today, praise is a technique that comes to mind as a positive behaviour management tool. It is also thought to provide encouragement to students, to help build self-esteem, and to build a close teacher-student relationship. It is an integral part of New Zealand classrooms. So how can we define praise? How can we use it? And how effective are we in our use of praise?

Definition

The definition of praise is to express approval or admiration of; commend; extol (Dictionary.com). Within the classroom this would mean to express positive teacher affect. It goes beyond the level of simple feedback, which can be neutral, negative or positive.

Driekurs (cited in Cope, 2007; Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963) makes a distinction between praise and encouragement. Praise, he says, is consistent with an authoritarian approach, which lowers self-esteem, provokes disruptive behaviour with the outcome more important than the process. Encouragement, he explains, is the reinforcement of effort or process, consistent with his view of a democratic teacher. Encouragement focuses on strength, avoids competition, and generates better-behaved students. Robins (2012) concurs, adding that praising for effort rather than performance also promotes risk-taking.

THE NEED TO SELF-EVALUATE

One of the seminal studies on praise was conducted by Brophy (1981). He argued that praise has been “seriously oversold” (p. 19). Brophy found that teacher praise was often infrequent, non-contingent, global rather than specific, and determined more by the students’ need for praise than by the quality of student conduct or achievement. He argued that teacher praise is often reactive to and under the control of student behaviour, dependent on the teacher’s personality and style and the students’ personality characteristics. Thus “teacher praise often was not deliberate reinforcement but instead a spontaneous reaction to student behaviour, elicited by the quality of student performance or by students bid for praise” (Brophy, 1981, p. 11). He concluded that rather than just assuming its effectiveness, teachers who wished to praise effectively would have to assess how individual students respond to praise, and in particular, how they process its meaning to make sense of their ability, effort and outcome of their effort - to praise well, rather than to praise often.

Bear (2010) agrees saying “overall, research indicates that how often students are praised and rewarded is much less important than the manner in which it occurs” (p. 115).

This suggests there is a need (as Partin et al., 2010, concluded), to self-evaluate our teaching behaviour in order to increase the application of the use of teacher praise to reinforce students’ appropriate behaviour and/or learning.

How then, can we praise well?

GLOBAL PRAISE

Global praise is non-targeted praise with comments such as ‘awesome work’ or ‘this class is fantastic’. Brophy found that this kind of praise was most often used in the classroom. Other more recent researchers confirm this finding (Beaman & Wheldall 2000, cited in Bear, 2010; Burnett and Mandel, 2010; Robins, 2012). Because this praise is not linked to a specific behaviour or completion of a task, these researchers agree with Brophy that it is not effective in changing the behaviour

or learning of an individual. If the recipient has no specific knowledge of why the comment was made, he or she is not empowered to make a change. The most appropriate use of global praise, according to Robins (2012) is in “a teacher/class relationship where it is understood to be intended for everyone, to create a corporate, feel-good moment” (p.135). Bear (2010) agrees, and adds that a teacher who uses frequent global praise avoids the use of criticism and punishment, thus enhancing a positive class climate.

CONTINGENT PRAISE

Contingent praise is given on observation of a desired behaviour to reinforce or strengthen it, and is commonly used in New Zealand classrooms (e.g. ‘Thank you for putting your hand up before speaking Sam’). Webster-Stratton (2012) argues that children with challenging behaviours often need higher doses of praise and attention than other students as they can undermine teaching efforts with their inattentiveness, disengagement and oppositional behaviour. In fact, Brophy (1981) found that the highest praise proportions did go to troublesome students who teachers were trying to motivate or reassure through positive treatment.

There is a wealth of research to show that contingent praise is a powerful reinforcer in a reduction of a variety of behaviour problems at the individual level (Bear, 2010; Brophy, 1981; Partin et al., 2010; Webster-Stratton, 2012). However, the use of contingent praise is not universally favoured. Robins (2012) contends that contingent praise may create dependency, and leave the recipient feeling controlled. She believes it encourages competition, and diverts attention away from learning. Additionally, Kohn (1999, cited in Robins, 2012) argues that using contingent praise to reinforce behaviour is ineffective, and that merely praising pro-social behaviour does nothing to address the causes of antisocial behaviour. His suggested alternative is to praise pupil autonomy and active learning. Pink (2011, cited in Robins, 2012) agrees, saying that as the workplace calls increasingly for creative and conceptual skills, we need to move away from a culture of compliance if students are to have an economically successful future. However as Bear (2010) points out, contingent praise is “a way to communicate important behavioural expectations that are commonly valued in our society” (p. 103).

SPECIFIC PRAISE AND EVALUATIVE PRAISE

Specific praise includes very specific information or descriptive feedback to the child in order to prompt thinking for the next learning or behaviour steps. It differs from evaluative praise, which

implies judgement and may not align to the values of the learner. Evaluative praise needs to take place within a trust relationship. If it is intended to judge and control the behaviour of students, or is an attempt to create a friendly cooperative classroom atmosphere (‘I like the way Susie has cleaned up her desk’) it may cause students to feel manipulated (Brophy,1981; Robins, 2012). Kohn (1999, cited in Robins, 2012) agrees, saying that this manipulation is divisive and damaging to pupil-teacher and peer relationships. When children are used as examples to the rest of the community “children are regularly reminded of where the power lies” (p. 67). In a Montessori environment, teachers are trained in the difference between evaluative praise, which they say imposes adult values on a child’s work, and descriptive praise, which scaffolds a child as they evaluate their own work in order to become independent thinkers and learners (Robins, 2012).

Bear (2010) points out, however, that individuals are more likely to imitate the behaviours that are praised, thus this kind of praise can be an effective behaviour management strategy. Webster-Stratton (2012) also believes that what she calls ‘proximity praise’ serves as a redirection to the disengaged student.

It does appear that the most effective specific praise focuses on effort and descriptive feedback (Brophy,1981; Bear, 2010; Webster-Stratton, 2012; Robins, 2012). Yet although researchers agree that specificity is necessary if praise is to be used as an effective reinforcer, Brophy (1981) found that teachers are specific in only about five percent of praise comments.

AGE-RELATED PRAISE

When praising, the age of the child should be considered. There appears to be a distinct difference to how children at different ages view praise. Developmentally, young children are more externally oriented. Younger students “may not clearly perceive the distinctions between praise that is not contingent, specific and credible” (Brophy,1981, p. 16). Younger students want to please adults and are more likely to accept praise at face value (Webster-Stratton, 2012). For these students, it constitutes guidance and positive feedback from an authority figure.

As the child gets older, however, this desire to please recedes. Older students become more sensitive to how praise and rewards are administered, and begin to reflect and analyse adults’ evaluational and moralistic statements, rather than simply internalise them as they did in the past (Bear, 2010; Brophy,1981). That may

explain why some researchers advise ability-feedback only for younger students and effort-feedback for older students (Burnett & Mandel, 2010).

CREDIBLE PRAISE

Brophy (1981) found praise was used often amongst teachers with low expectations for student learning and most likely directed towards the lowest achievers. Slower students, he found, are often praised both publicly and privately, with “teachers not so much trying to reinforce specific behaviour as to build the teacher-student relationship” (Brophy, 1981, p. 18). And as Bear (2010, p. 113) points out “older students are inclined to conclude that frequent praise for really simple tasks are given primarily to those who ‘need it’, that is, those lacking in ability or self-discipline”. When we give enthusiastic praise to these students the praise becomes less credible (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963; Robins, 2012; Rogers, 2009). This is especially true if it is not backed by, or is contradicted by non-verbal expressive behaviour. Webster-Stratton (2012, p. 201) agrees, saying, “children easily pick up on praise that is insincere, and bask in praise that is genuine.” Breaux (2007) concurs “Be genuine. Students see insincerities coming from a mile away. Contrary to popular belief, they are not easy to fool. Never praise a job that is not well done just because you want to shower students with praise. Find the good, the real good and compliment that, but don’t neglect to fix what needs fixing” (p. 14).

PRAISE VS INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Researchers have found that behaviour reinforced by the use of praise and rewards often “do not generalise outside of the setting in which they are systematically applied” (Bear, 2010, p. 108), which implies that praise does not build intrinsic motivation. In tasks it appears that, although in the short term praise produces better performance, once removed, performance noticeably declines (Robins, 2012). So, are we undermining the child’s development of intrinsic motivation when praising?

Praise to develop intrinsic motivation and self-discipline needs to be different than for management and control. Bear (2010) argues we need to use praise more strategically to develop the social, emotional and behavioural competencies of self-discipline so that in the absence of praise students none-the-less act in a socially and morally responsible manner.

Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999), agree. Their meta-analysis of 128 experiments showed that verbal rewards (specifically positive feedback) “had

a significant positive effect on intrinsic motivation” (p. 653). They found that recipients viewed praise differently from tangible rewards, in part because the verbal praise was unexpected. However, Deci et al., (1999; 2001) found that praise (but in particular rewards) may undermine intrinsic motivation if it was perceived to be controlling and when social comparisons were made. The effect of praising, therefore, was sensitive to the “interpersonal context within which positive feedback is administered, and whether it is interpreted as informational, or controlling” (Deci et al., 2001, p. 4). Brophy (2010) agrees, pointing out that, generally, praise should be administered in private and rather than be controlling, be appreciative and informative. Praise, he suggests, “preserves and supports intrinsic motivation by avoiding incentive systems or explanations that lead students to infer that they engage only to please you or to obtain rewards” (p. 148).

Interestingly, the study of Pierce, Cameron, Banko and So (2003) challenges Brophy’s view. They found that even rewards (or incentive systems) tied to meeting progressively demanding standards of performance enhance intrinsic motivation.

Many researchers would agree that praise only rarely has a negative impact on intrinsic motivation (Akin-Little, Eckert, Lovett & Little, 2004; Cameron, Banko & Pierce, 2003). Furthermore, it does appear that praise is unlikely to affect intrinsic motivation if children are praised for their persistent process and sustained efforts, rather than for their intelligence or ability (Dreikurs, cited in Cope, 2007; Dweck, 2007; Webster-Stratton, 2012). Praising a child’s intelligence can be harmful, explains Dweck (2007), as this implies a belief in an innate, fixed ability whereas more and more research in psychology supports the stance that dedication and persistence can transform the basic capacity to learn.

But is intrinsic motivation something we *can* affect? Deci et al., (1999) believe that intrinsic motivation is driven by personally directed and achieved goals and not controlled by external regulation. Constructivists would also argue that intrinsic motivation cannot be built by external agency – teachers and students can only create an appropriate environment in which a robust sense of self can grow and develop. And it may be that intrinsic motivation is developmental. Self-evaluation and self-praise, explains Webster-Stratton (2012) “is a developmental process and even children from positive family environments vary in the age at which they develop this kind of internal motivation and positive self-regard” (p.192).

TO PRAISE OR NOT?

Some children do not seem to respond to praise. Burnett & Mandel (2010) found that although the vast majority of students wanted to be praised, 17 percent indicated that they did not want to be praised at all, individually or publicly. This response could indicate a number of things. It may be that they don't have the social skills or the teacher-student relationship is fragile (Webster-Stratton, 2012). It may also indicate an ill-informed assumption.

PRAISING THE MĀORI LEARNER

One common assumption is that Māori children do not like to be praised publicly and find it embarrassing and shameful. However Butterworth (2004), in her research on Māori interpretation and response to teacher praise, noted that we should not stop praising Māori students even when they indicate they are 'shamed'. She recognised that reaction as an emotional response to the unfamiliarity of praise. Butterworth pointed to the importance of the teacher speaking to Māori students about their responses to praise before making that assumption. Another assumption, that Māori parents do not praise their children for the fear they may be seen as 'whakahihi' (arrogant) was also contradicted by her findings that they were indeed praised verbally and non-verbally within the confines of their whānau (extended family) where their praise would not be misinterpreted. Butterworth (2004) found that Māori students referenced praise to their world outside of the classroom, and that effective praise needed to be in a combined cultural/educational frame. Students sought the meaning of praise from their wider context, influenced by te hinengaro (the Māori way of thinking where thoughts and feelings interact). The concept of whānau (embodying the concept of whanaungatanga) (relationships) operating within the classroom studied, changed the students response to praise from shamed (whakama) to a more positive response, seen by their body language. The values of whanaungatanga (respect, caring, reciprocal, based on hui) and manaakitanga (encourage, support, accept) influenced the children's perceptions of themselves as learners and as Māori. The ongoing interaction between the emotional and cognitive domains of these children lead to continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of praise and positive feedback.

Butterworth (2004) concluded that isolating praise to the classroom could engender a negative response, and the inclusion of parents as praisers of their children further enhanced the children's belief in themselves as effective learners (and the

parents' views of themselves as effective parents). Webster-Stratton (2012) also advises sharing praise with the students' parents, as this positive home-school communication can reinforce a particularly challenging behaviour.

CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In other cultural contexts, Robins (2012) contends that Chinese parents do not use praise unless there is an achievement to praise, and this is done in private. Thus Chinese children do not expect affirmation of their skills and abilities, are sturdy enough to accept accurate appraisal, and co-relate the perception of effort and ability. Japanese and Taiwanese parents also focused on effort as the means to achievement. Thus, concludes Robins, contingent praise is of no cultural relevance to many children being educated in our schools.

INTERPERSONAL EFFECT OF PRAISE

It is significant to note that the effectiveness or otherwise of praise is sensitive to context, situation, and to relationships. Praise by a poor classroom manager in danger of losing control may be seen as a desperate attempt to "do something" (Brophy, 1981, p. 27). Similar teacher praise statements "can be perceived as reinforcing by certain students in certain situations, but perceived as manipulation or condescension by other students in certain situations" (Bear, 2010, p. 108); As Brophy (2010) puts it "identical teacher statements made under the same circumstances and with the same intent can be experienced very differently and may have very different effects in different individuals" (p. 23). Praising is not an exact science. It will vary in effectiveness from situation to situation, and teachers should evaluate the appropriateness within the unique context and also consider the relationship dynamic before praising.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So ... how should we praise? It largely depends on the purpose. Global praise can serve a function of creating a positive class culture. But if you are looking to effect learning and behaviour, most researchers agree that praise should be delivered contingently, be specific, credible, and provide feedback that is task-related. The effects of praise can depend on the age of the child, and is sensitive to contexts, situation and relationships. Although there may be cultural differences in the way children respond to praise, it is important not to make assumptions about this. It is better to praise for effort rather than ability or performance. Evaluative or judgemental praise should be limited in order that children do not feel controlled or

manipulated, and that intrinsic motivation is not affected. As teachers, we need to evaluate our use of praise to ensure that the majority of it empowers children to reflect, to move to the next learning or behaviour step, to become risk-takers, to grow self-efficacy, and become autonomous learners.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Miriam Ferguson



Miriam Ferguson is a training RTLB in Cluster 18, and this literature review was written as part of the Learning and Behaviour paper requirement. She was a teacher for many years in New Zealand primary schools before teaching in a Special Education Needs (SEN) Department in a secondary school in Bromley, London, igniting an interest in special education. Returning to New Zealand she became a supplementary learning support teacher while completing a DipSpEd followed by a Masters of Education degree at Waikato University.

Miriam is interested in all things educational, in particular, the critical application of research to practice.

Email

miriamferg@hotmail.com