Praise

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The word praise originates from the Latin verb *pretiare*, meaning to highly value. The seminal work on the use of praise within the classroom context was produced by J. Brophy who defined praise as “commending the worth of” or “to express approval or admiration” (1981, p.5). J. Thomas (1991) used the term “descriptive reinforcement” to describe praise. He outlined a three stage model for providing praise in the classroom as follows: (a) personalize the praise by using the student's name, (b) use one of 110 praise statements, and (c) outline what the student did to merit being praised. P. C. Burnett (2001) referred to Thomas's 110 statements as general praise noting examples such as “that's great,” “well done,” “terrific job,” and “that's fantastic.” In summary, teacher praise involves positive words, accompanied by positive affect, and as such is a targeted, affective response to students' behaviors or performance.

The term feedback is often used alongside praise but is quite different. Feedback is used to guide students in ways to improve their performance by providing information about their ability or inability to achieve success (Hattie, 1993). One type of feedback is attributional feedback. Teachers who note that students' success is attributed to their hard work are providing effort feedback (for example, “Tim, your great results reflect your hard work”), while teachers who ascribe success to ability (for example, “Great result, Rachel, you are clever at math”) are providing ability feedback. Effort and ability feedback are referred to as attributional feedback because they attribute success and performance to either effort or ability.

Effective and Ineffective Praise

Brophy conducted a functional analysis of praise in the classroom and noted that teachers' verbal praise did not equate to positive reinforcement because praise was typically used infrequently, without reference to specific behaviors and often without credibility and sincerity. Brophy noted that classroom research suggested that only 6% of interactions involved praise, and he concluded that high rates of praise were not evident in classrooms. Brophy described 12 guidelines for both effective and ineffective praise.

The key ingredients for effective praise according to Brophy (1981) are:

Praise should be delivered in response to a specific behavior.

The behavior, deserving of praise, should described in specific terms.

Praise should be sincere, credible, and spontaneous.

Praise should reward the attainment of clearly defined and understood performance criteria.

Praise should provide information about the student's competencies.

Praise should be given in recognition of noteworthy effort or success at a difficult task for that particular student.

Praise should attribute success to effort and ability implying that similar success in the future.

Ineffective praise:

Is delivered randomly or unsystematically,

Is restricted to global positive reactions delivered in a bland fashion with minimal attention to the student or behavior,

Rewards participation unrelated to performance,

Compares the student's performance to other students,

Is given without regard to the effort needed to complete the task,

Attributes success to ability alone or to external factors such as luck or the ease of the task, and

Is given by the teacher who acts as a power figure and external authority in a manipulative manner.

Not all of the literature is supportive of the use of praise in the classroom even when used effectively. R. Hitz and A. Driscoll (1994) noted literature that suggested that praise led to low expectations of success, discouraged children from judging for themselves, created anxiety, invited dependency, evoked defensiveness, and was delivered in the context of a power relationship. The major concern expressed was that praise was intrusive and controlling. Hitz and Driscoll advocated giving encouragement not praise and hence the mantra, encourage don't praise, emerged and formed part of many teacher training programs.

There has also been some debate regarding the use of ability feedback by teachers following a student's success. Brophy's guidelines noted ability feedback in the effective list but also noted a limitation by including the use of ability feedback alone in the ineffective list. Those who advocate the use of ability

feedback highlight the impact that it has on the formation and development of students' self-concept (Craven, Marsh, & Debus, 1991). In addition, D. H. Schunk (1983) and B. Weiner (1986) noted that ability feedback produced higher expectations for future performance, greater skill acquisition, higher self-concept, enhanced satisfaction with performance, and further striving for achievement. Opposing the use of ability feedback in the classroom was C. M. Mueller and C. S. Dweck (1998) who argued against its use when they found that students who faced failure after receiving ability feedback showed low effort, poor persistence at a task and high frustration due to attributing their poor performance to lack of ability. Of further interest is the fact that the use of effort feedback in the classroom has limitations. J. Henderlong and M. R. Lepper (2002) noted that the positive impact of effort feedback might be restricted if effort is overemphasised and the student perceives this as an indication that they lack ability and have to work hard to get anywhere. Furthermore, providing effort feedback may also be negative if hard work and effort result in failure.

Developmental Differences

Burnett (2001) investigated 747 elementary students' preferences for classroom praise. The students were in grades 3 to 7 and aged 8 to 12 years. Students reported that they wanted to be praised in classroom. Forty percent wanted to be praised often, 51% wanted to be praised sometimes, and only 9% never wanted to be praised. Interestingly, 84% wanted to be praised for trying hard and effort, while only 16% wanted to be praised for their ability and being smart. Most of students (52%) wanted to be praised quietly, while 31% wanted to be praised loudly in front of the class, leaving 17% who did not want to be praised publicly or quietly.

Developmental differences across the grades were noted. The need for praise increased from grade 3 to 5 and then declined over the next two grades levels. Students in grades 3 and 7 wanted to be praised at similar levels with the intermediate grades reporting that they wished to be praised more frequently. The students wanting the highest amount of praise were those in grades 4 to 6, suggesting that this is a developmental phase where students seek recognition and reassurance from their teachers. There were also developmental differences across the grades for effort and ability feedback. As students progressed through the grades they reported wanting more effort feedback and less ability feedback. Grade 3 students reported that they wanted about the same level of both effort and ability feedback, while grade 7 students reported wanting more effort feedback and less ability feedback. This suggests that younger students prefer to hear that they are smart and capable, but once this information is integrated into their self-concept they prefer to have their achievements attributed to their efforts.

Elwell and Tiberio (1994) investigated 620 high school students' preferences for the use of praise in their classrooms. Students in grades 9 and 10 wanted to be praised less frequently and less publicly than their younger and older counterparts in grades 7 and 8 and grades 11 and 12 respectively. The students in this study perceived the use of praise in the classroom as appropriate and expected to receive it for academic-related behaviors but not for socially appropriate behaviors. Nearly 60% of the students surveyed preferred quiet and private praise or no praise at all for academic success, while 41% wanted to be praised loudly and publicly for their achievements. Elwell and Tiberio noted that students respond differently to praise, and teachers need to know about when, where, and under what circumstances praise should be delivered in the classroom.

Using Praise in the Classroom

The research findings on the use of praise and feedback in the classroom have been integrated into guidelines for teachers. Burnett (2003) described a summary of what has been learned about praise and feedback in the classroom as a result of research.

Positive statements. Positive statements by teachers have a powerful impact and should be used in the classroom. Positive statements must be related to a behavior or performance. General praise that is not targeted or related to a specific behavior or performance has little impact on students and is not related to students' perceptions of the classroom environment or relationship with teacher. Thomas's 1991 descriptive reinforcement model (that is, name the student, use positive statements, describe the behavior) has merit.

Individual feedback. Praise and feedback should mostly be given individually. Only 31% of elementary students and 24% of high school students reported having a preference for public praise. Teachers should monitor a student's reaction to feedback as nearly one in five students reported not wanting to be praised at all, but this preference depends on circumstances and the student's grade level. Students should be praised for both effort and ability where warranted and appropriate for the grade level. Both types of feedback can be used despite having advantages and limitations.

Importance of grade level. The grade of the student is important. Students in grades 4 to 6 like to be praised more frequently and more publicly than students in grades 3 and 7, while students in grades 9 and 10 have a lower need for praise when compared with their older and younger high school peers. In the elementary school classroom students' preference for receiving effort feedback increases with grade, while preference for receiving ability feedback declines with grade.

See also:Teacher Expectations

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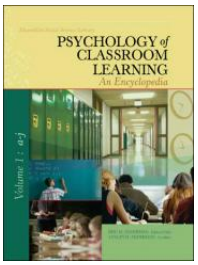

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