

Effective Praise

Is verbal praise effective in changing behavior in elementary school students?

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Effective Verbal Praise

Chapter 1

Introduction

For the completion of my thesis project I will be examining the research on the effectiveness of praise to change behavior in the classroom in early education. I will be doing a review of the literature to determine effective uses of verbal praise for teachers. Knowing if praise can be used more effectively could allow teachers to better help students by using techniques that benefit the students learning. Knowing how to use praise to change students' behaviors could lead to fewer interruptions in class, students being more focused and therefore more learning occurring. Learning about what effects praise is having on students could also tell us if there are any negative aspects associated with it. If the types of verbal praise being used in schools are not effective, we should try to eliminate them or find ways to make verbal praise effective and positive. I believe that learning more about the effectiveness of verbal praise is important in that understanding it can have an impact, positive or negative, on how a classroom in run and the level of learning that takes place. Praise is a strategy that is used many times throughout the each day in the classroom as where some strategies may not be used as often, this is why I believe that it is extremely important to know how to use praise effectively and know its effects.

The research question: Is verbal praise an effective tool for changing behavior in early elementary classrooms, if so what does this praise look like?

Praise is only one of the many reinforcements used in behaviorism to try and change student behavior, in a classroom setting. Praise can be coupled with many other approaches as well to change behavior or motivate students. I will try to focus my research on just verbal praise and how is it used and if it is effective in changing student behavior or not.

Chapter 2: Review of literature

Key search words included, effectiveness of praise, praise in changing behavior in a classroom, and praise in early education classrooms. I use the academic search premier and other databases from the BSU library as well as Google search engine to find the articles that I included in my review of literature.

Burnett (2011) stated in "Praise", that "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." This suggests that the results of praise may not always be positive.

Burnett did a study on grades 3-7 on students' preferences for praise in the classroom. His results stated that out of the 747 students interviewed 40% of them wanted to be praised often, 51% wanted to be praised sometimes and 9% never wanted to be praised. 84% of students also stated that they would rather be praised for their efforts while 16% wanted to be praised for their abilities and being smart. More students, 52%, preferred to be praised privately vs publicly, in front of the class. The study also found that the "need for praise increased from grade 3 to 5 and then declined over the next two grades levels. 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, (Burnett 2011)." In elementary classrooms the majority of students' preference for receiving effort feedback increases with age, and preference for ability feedback declines with grade level. This could suggest a correspondence in feedback and praise preference and developmental stages. Knowing where students are developmentally and what kind of feedback or verbal praise they prefer is a key step in seeing positive changes.

Burnett stated that 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 be 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 there can be similar success in the future.

Brophy also addressed some of the things that would cause praise to be ineffective, such as it:

- 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
- It is given by a teacher who acts as a power figure and external authority in a manipulative manner.

Another study pertaining to praise, was the Classroom checkup – a model for increasing praise and decreasing disruptive behavior. Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, and Merrell (2008) conducted this study with the purpose of evaluating the effects of the Classroom Check-Up and visual performance feedback on teacher and student behavior. Results indicated that implementation of the Classroom Check-Up plus visual performance feedback increased teacher implementation of classroom management strategies, including increased use of praise, use of behavior-specific praise, and decreased use of reprimands. These changes in teacher behavior led to decreases in classroom disruptive behavior. Reinke et al. (2008) infers that the results of this study show that consultation at the classroom level can create meaningful teacher and student behavior changes.

The definition for praise included any verbal statement or gesture that indicated teacher approval of a desired student behavior. Praise was separated into behavior specific, which was if specific feedback for the desired student behavior was provided and general praise which was if no specific feedback was provided. Nonverbal praise such as stickers and high fives were considered general praise. The definition of reprimands for this study was verbal comments or gestures made by the teacher indicating disapproval of student behavior. Disruptive behavior was classified as statements or actions by an individual student or group of students that disrupted or interfered with ongoing classroom activities for the teacher and/or one or more peers.

Teachers found that focusing on increasing praise with individual students performance feedback led teachers to increase their use of behavior specific praise for the targeted students and the other students in the classroom as well. Results for the teachers varied but at their one month check-up all four classes demonstrated higher rates of praise and lower rates of disruptions. All classes also showed an increase in behavior specific praise and a decreased in general praise.

In “Creating a Positive Classroom Atmosphere: Teacher’s Use of Effective Praise and Feedback”, Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi & Vo (2009) states that “Creating a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere is one of the most powerful tools teachers can use to encourage children and prevent behavior problems from occurring.” Throughout the article Conroy and the other authors talk about how if a teacher responds in a harsh way to problem behavior then the student will see this as a way to get the teacher’s attention. However if a teacher provides corrective feedback it will help the students learn alternative behaviors that will gain the teacher’s attention. If teachers praise appropriate behaviors and ignore problem ones children will learn that these are the types of behaviors that get a response from the teacher. Children will learn more skills and behaviors this way and there will be more time for instruction.

The article talks about how praise is a complex reciprocal process that involves both the teacher and the student(s). The article defines praise as “teacher-initiated statements that convey to children the specific academic or social behaviors in which the teachers would like to see students continue to engage (Conroy et al. 2009).” The effectiveness of praise is determined by many factors. The authors included several of the factors they think praise needs to be effective. Praise should be specific statements about the appropriate behavior children display; children need to know explicitly what behavior what behavior is being praised. Praise should be contingent upon desired behavior and be provided immediately following the behavior. Effective praise should be teacher initiated and requires that a teacher observe children’s behaviors and give the praise in a timely manner. Praise should focus on a children’s improvement and efforts. Conroy et al. (2009) states that if praise becomes an evaluation of individual abilities or outcomes children are judged on the basis of their cognitive abilities causing children to be less confident, and afraid of making mistakes. This type of praise may set children up for failure. Praise that focuses on efforts lets children know it is acceptable to make mistakes. It should be sincere, be delivered with an affirmative natural voice and be appropriate for children’s abilities and age. Praise should avoid comparisons or competition. Telling a child they did better than last time, and they are improving is more effective than comparing them to classmates.

Conroy et al. (2009) states that “Research indicates that increases in teacher praise have positive effects on children’s academic and social behaviors.” The article also goes over some strategies that teachers could use to try to increase the quality and quantity of their praise in the classroom and then discusses how effective feedback can create a positive classroom atmosphere.

Lively and Tapp discuss how the research they found shows that traditional praise is counterproductive and teachers are still continuing to use these ineffective techniques in their classrooms, in their article “Think Twice Before you Speak”. They implemented a study that found effective praise produced greater behavioral gains than traditional praise did. “Studies have shown some statements of praise to lower students’ confidence in themselves. 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)," stated by Lively and Tapp.

The study that they did worked on teaching new elementary teachers (still in collage) how to use effective praise and the effects that it can have. The question the study addressed was, what is the effect of praise within a graduate early education course? One group got effective feedback on their work, which consisted of specific statements addressing their performance, while others got traditional praise, statements such as "good work" and "super job." The article offered some great examples of effective praise and ineffective praise and included some comments by the students on what they thought about the praise they got and the results. My focus with this piece of literature was more in the introduction where they talked about the effects of praise on children not as much the effects on college students. However the study showed education students how to use effective praise by having it used on them so they still provided effective praise that can be used in early education classroom.

The article "Behavior Specific Praise in the Classroom," authored by Stephanie T. Villeda, Brooke C. Shuster, Laruen Magill and Erik W. Carter, was created by examining other studies to create a guide to provide training and technical assistance to schools. Villeda et al.'s (2014) state, "When used effectively in the classroom praise can increase the social and academic performance of the students as well as improve classroom climate." The most powerful praise is specific to a student's behavior. Behavior specific praise gives students specific, positive verbal feedback indicating approval of social or academic behavior. It is an evidence based classroom management strategy that improves student behavior by letting students know what they are doing correctly. BSP should be a description of a desired behavior, specific to the student or class, and a positive praise statement. A general ratio of 4:1 praise to reprimand is recommended, or about 6 praise statements every 15 minutes. The authors provided some examples and non-examples of behavior specific praise statements. An example of BSP would be "Laura, excellent use of our new vocabulary word!" and a non-example would be "Good job" or "Stop that!" Villeda et al. (2014) states that "when implemented consistently and correctly, BSP increases instructional time, on-task behavior, and correct academic responses.

In another relevant study, Wright (2012) found that the research says effective teacher praise consists of two elements, first a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior and second, a signal of teacher approval. Change in student's behavior or academic performance is effective if it both indicates teacher approval, informs student about how praise conformed to teacher expectations, and if the student finds the praise reinforcing.

Suggestion for increasing praises effectiveness:

- describe noteworthy behavior – give students performance feedback to guide their learning

- praise effort and accomplishment, not ability – this helps students to see a direct link in the effort they invest in a task and the improved academic or behavioral performance
- match the method of praise delivery to student preferences – give public or private praise on student’s preferences. Elementary students may easily accept public praise. When in doubt give praise privately.

Research also found “Data suggests that classroom environments fail to provide instructionally supportive contexts and contingencies that promote and maintain appropriate behavior (Moore Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010).” Across age groups and irrespective of disability, teachers’ use of contingent praise effectively reinforced, or increased, a variety of appropriate student behaviors and academic skills including following directions, engagement in instruction, and on task behavior. Praise of positive behavior decreases disruptive behavior, inappropriate talk and turning around in seat, whereas praise combined with attention to problem behaviors leads to decreases in talk outs and arguing with the teacher requests as well as other disruptive behavior. “..teacher praise can be used to reinforce some students’ appropriate behavior, however all forms of praise are not necessarily reinforcing to all students and in all situations according to Brophy (1981) as said by Moore Partin et al. (2010). In educational contexts statements of praise should be directly linked to the behaviors or skills that the teacher wishes to increase. Teachers should provide praise that explicitly specifies desirable behaviors and provides sufficient feedback about the correctness of the students’ behavior or performance. Teachers should evaluate their praise for its effectiveness often.

Limitation and weaknesses:

One of the weaknesses that my review of literature includes is all of the resources used are built off of information and studies from a range of years but all cited resources are dated in the last 10 years. Using more works from later dates could allow for readers to see if there was a change in results over the years or if this is a newer approach. Another limitation is that my literature mostly includes suggestions based off studies, or meta-analysis of research, or the conclusions of the study. I did include some research studies themselves but focused on techniques that were proven to work and how they can be implemented and not as much on the process of how they found what worked that the studies themselves provided. The research question I tried to focus on was if verbal praise is an effective tool for changing behavior in early elementary classroom, some of the articles and studies I found did address the question of praise at an early elementary level or I just focused on the results for that age group. However most of the literature I found seems to be geared towards all ages in general ways to provide effective feedback. The focus on early elementary ages is weak in some of the literature I choose to include.

Chapter 3 – Conclusion and summary

The literature that I was able to find covered a range of information on praise including types of praise that can be effective, ways that praise can be ineffective and negative, students preferences on the types of praise they are given, if it should be public or private, and the amount of praise that should be given to each student. According to all the literature I found I believe that verbal praise is effective when it is used continually, is behavior specific and is fit to student's preferences. If verbal praise is used correctly it can be an effective tool in changing both academic and behavioral behaviors. When not used correctly however it can have negative effects such as embarrassment to the student, anger, or have no effect at all. Teachers should be monitoring their praise to be sure they are giving appropriate praise to every student. Checking to see if the praise is having an effect, positive or negative, on the students and adjusting the verbal praise based on results will lead to better results.

Some students prefer to be given praise often while others may prefer it only sometimes. Some studies have shown that using six behavior specific praise statements every 15 mins is recommended. I believe that using these statements as much as possible is important but what makes praise effective is making sure that the praise statements used are sincere and meaningful and show what the expectations for classroom behavior and academics are. Then you are recognizing the student for following and meeting these expectations and giving them positive attention for their behavior.

In my personal experience working with elementary age children they really like being told that they are doing a good job and that their teacher is proud of them. Looking back anytime I would use a reward system or praise my students with feedback I would have less trouble with that behavior. But I used a lot of non-behavior specific praise statements as well and it is suggested that these statements are not helpful to the students and should be avoided. Something more specific will stick with them longer, especially if used repeatedly. This is a tricky habit to break which is why I also found some ways for teachers to try and increase the use of behavior specific praise (see pamphlet). This is something that may take time and hard work for teachers to get used to but the research shows that it is worth it.

For further reading:

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- Wright, Jim. (2012). Teacher Praise: An Efficient Tool to Motivate Students. How RTI Works Series'. Retrieved April 2015. www.interventioncentral.org

Increasing use of effective praise by the teacher

Keep daily score – teachers should set a goal of the number of praise statements that he or she would like to deliver during a class period. The teacher should keep track of the behavior specific praise (BSP) statements they give and compare the total to the goal

Keep track of the students who are receiving praise statements. Teachers should pick a few to praise each day /hour and make sure to get all students as equally as they can. Make sure all students are receiving some BSP. (Wright 2012)

Remind oneself with written prompts, on the board, post-it notes, or laminated cards posted around the room. (Villeda et al. 2015)



References

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- Wright, Jim. (2012). Teacher Praise: An Efficient Tool to Motivate Students. How RTI Works Series'. Retrieved April 2015. www.interventioncentral.org

Examples of good specific praise statements can include:

"Thank you for keeping your hands to yourself Ana!"

"John you worked hard on these math problems."

"Your handwriting has improved, it is neat and clear here, great work."

Non- examples of behavior specific praise would include:

Don't touch him!

Good job

Sara that's not nice.

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Thesis project

Handbook for Effective Verbal Praise

Recommendations for Practice