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Abstract

While words of encouragement from teachers may seem innocuous on the surface, the practice may have hidden costs (Kohn, 1993). Although effective in the short-run, the use of extrinsic motivators, such as praise, has been shown to have an undermining effect on long-term motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Mindful of the fact that academic intrinsic motivation decreases from ages 9-18 (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1996, 2006), the present study sought to gain insight into the phenomenon of classroom praise from the perspective of 105 elementary teachers, revealing their explanation and justification for this practice. Although research has documented the effects of praise in the school setting (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kohn, 1993; Reeve, 2006), there have been few accounts of *how* and *why* teachers administer praise. The realities of the elementary classroom, including student discipline, standardized curriculum, and high-stakes testing, provide context for understanding the implementation of systems of incentives. While the open-ended descriptions of motivational techniques are insightful in their own right, the teachers' explanations and justification for these approaches represent a philosophy of education, one that both reflects and shapes our culture.

Introduction

Montessori (1967) expressed the view that teachers should avoid interrupting a child who is fully engaged in an academic activity. She exhorts teachers to follow her dictum that "as soon as concentration has begun, act as if the child does not exist" (Montessori, 1967, p. 280). While academic engagement is touted as a national instructional goal (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013), current educational practice often opposes this objective. For example, the well-intentioned teacher can quickly disturb the fragile spell of an engaged child by offering words of encouragement or praise. The ubiquitous *Good job!* or even the more informational *I like the way you are . . .* represent staples of schooling, common elements of the teacher's toolbox for ensuring behavioral compliance and academic success. Contrary to Montessori's advice, teachers praise and correct mistakes constantly, perpetuating an expectation for feedback that is fundamental to American education.

Educational psychologists have shown that approval from parents, teachers, and peers is a developmental need of elementary-aged children (Piaget, 1959, original work 1923; Vygotsky, 1986). In a survey of parental attitudes, Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that 85% of parents felt that praising the successful performance of their child was necessary to make the child know he or she is competent or intelligent. The implicit theory of parenting is that affirmation of ability builds the child's self-esteem and fosters self-concept and motivation. In the classroom setting, teachers take on the parental role, representing the authority figure who can bestow approval or disapproval with respect to the child's behavior and academic output.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that educators leverage words of approval as a key method of ensuring the behavioral compliance and academic progress of students. Along with tangible rewards, such as food, stickers, gold stars, and certificates, praise represents common currency in the elementary classroom (Kohn, 1993). In his

seminal article on the subject, Brophy (1981) offered a working definition of praise, explaining the purpose is “to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration” (p. 5). He went on to a more complete definition, drawing attention to the emotional content of such an interaction in the classroom setting:

It connotes a more intense or detailed teacher response to student behavior than terms such as “feedback” or “affirmation of correct response” do. When teachers praise students, they do not merely tell them the degree of success they achieved (by nodding or repeating answers, by saying “okay,” “right,” or “correct,” or giving a letter grade or percentage score). In addition to such feedback, praise statements express positive teacher affect (surprise, delight, excitement) and/or place the student’s behavior in context by giving information about its value or its implications about the student’s status. (Brophy, 1981, p. 5-6)

By bringing out the relational component of praise, Brophy suggests that individual students may respond differently to praise. While some students may light up with public recognition of their accomplishments, others may feel embarrassed, wishing to be left alone. According to Butler (1987), the cumulative effect of verbal praise may influence a child’s self-concept, promoting a personal assessment of abilities through performance outcomes.

In a related work, Mueller and Dweck (1998) distinguished between praise for ability and praise for effort in fifth graders. They found that praising for ability (*You are smart*) focuses the child upon performance goals rather than learning goals. They also found that children praised for ability exhibited less resilience after failure than those praised for effort (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Taking the analysis into more detail, Corpus and Lepper (2007) found that *process praise* (effort) enhanced motivation, while *product praise*

(ability or achievement) decreased motivation for fourth grade girls. Conversely, both types of praise had no significant effect upon subsequent motivation for boys in the same age group. This solidifies the point that praise may have varying effect upon different individuals.

In a conceptual piece on a similar theme, Kohn (2001) put forth five potential unintended consequences of verbal praise from parents and teachers, including “1) manipulating children . . . 2) creating praise junkies . . . 3) stealing a child’s pleasure . . . 4) losing interest . . . and 5) reducing achievement” (pp. 1-2).” Kohn recommended a circumspect approach to praising children of all ages, suggesting that parents and educators provide informational feedback, asking questions rather than offering evaluation. This aligns with Montessori’s (1967) exhortation that teachers should never “interfere by praising a child’s work” (p. 244).

Statement of the Problem

While words of encouragement from teachers may seem innocuous on the surface, the practice may have hidden costs (Kohn, 1993). Although effective in the short-run, the use of extrinsic motivators, such as praise, has been shown to have an undermining effect on long-term motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Mindful of the fact that academic intrinsic motivation decreases from ages 9-18 (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Gottfried & Gottfried, 1996, 2006; Harter, 1981; Lepper, Iyengar, & Corpus, 2005), I wonder the extent to which the pervasive use of praise fosters an extrinsic orientation toward learning. Although research has documented the effects of praise in the school setting (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kohn, 1993; Reeve, 2006), there have been few accounts of *how* and *why* teachers administer praise. The realities of the elementary classroom, including student discipline, standardized curriculum, and high-stakes testing, provide context for understanding the implementation of systems of incentives. Yet, the individuals possessing the most insight

into the phenomenon have not been given the opportunity to describe and justify this practice.

Purpose of the Study

The present study sought to gain insight into the phenomenon of praise within the elementary classroom in grades one through five. Through the responses of elementary teachers, the study uncovered an array of approaches to student motivation, with emphasis upon verbal and written rewards. The study sought to elucidate techniques that teachers employ to ensure student compliance with classroom rules and mastery of proscribed curricula. Since the use of verbal rewards has become common practice, particularly within the elementary setting, the present study entails problematizing a customary aspect of educational practice. While descriptions of motivational techniques are insightful in their own right, the teachers' explanations and justification for these approaches represent a philosophy of education, one that both reflects and shapes our culture.

Theoretical Framework

The chosen framework of the current study, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) grew out of DeCharms' (1968) concept of personal causation, where "man's primary motivational propensity is to be effective in producing changes in his environment" (p. 269). DeCharms (1968) introduced the terms "Origin and Pawn" (p. 315) to characterize what Heider (1958) termed "personal causality" (p. 100). DeCharms defined an individual who perceives himself/herself to be an Origin as intrinsically motivated, while someone who considers himself/herself to be a Pawn is extrinsically motivated. The term Origin would describe individuals who seem to "attack problems in the environment with zest, apparently seeking uncertainty and change, and reveling in risky situations" (p. 327). Conversely, a Pawn would be someone who

depends upon external direction or some type of incentive to instigate action.

Building upon DeCharms' constructs, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits three universal psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan, (1991) *Autonomy* represents the extent to which one feels in control of his or her actions. *Competence* concerns the individual's expectation of performing activities at a proscribed level. *Relatedness* characterizes the process by which someone forms emotional connections with significant others, including parents, teachers, administrators, and fellow students (Deci et al., 1991). Deci et al. indicated that individuals who experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness are intrinsically motivated to the extent that their acts are "fully endorsed" (p. 328) at the cognitive level. According to Deci (1975), intrinsically motivated activities are those in which people engage for their inherent enjoyment with no external reward or compulsion. Although individuals with an intrinsic orientation experience psychological well-being and happiness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), cultural factors, including education and parenting can foster or undermine intrinsic motivation.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains this undermining effect, where children lose motivation to engage in a proscribed activity once the reward is removed. Deci and Ryan (1985) characterized praise as a verbal reward, which can be perceived as either informational or controlling by individual students. In a study on this topic, Deci and Ryan (2000) found that praise interpreted by students as informational fostered long-term intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Conversely, they concluded that controlling praise undermined long-term intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In a related study, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (2001) found that informational praise was more effective for college students than for elementary students.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the collection and analysis of data:

- How do elementary teachers use praise to enhance academic and behavioral outcomes of students?
- How do elementary teachers implement and justify their use of praise in the classroom?
- How useful is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985) in explaining the use of praise by elementary teachers?

Method

The study employed mixed methods, including quantitative survey data and open-ended textual data to gain insight into teacher practices and attitudes. While the quantitative portion of data collection and analysis provided a broad understanding of teacher practice, the open-ended qualitative data provided rich description (Geertz, 1973) of the classroom setting. Links to Survey Monkey were sent to 200 elementary teachers of grades one to five within a single school district in the Southern United States. Participants in the survey included 105 teachers (53% response rate), spanning a range of teaching experience at a variety of grade levels. Ninety-nine female and six male teachers represented a balance of new and experienced practitioners. The written survey consisted of five demographic items, two Likert-type items, and 11 open-ended questions, allowing the teachers to comment freely on their use of systems of incentives and praise in the classroom.

Coding and Analysis. I coded and organized data in relation to the research questions and through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). While I sought to limit my interpretation during the Results, I reserved comment until the subsequent Discussion. However, I reject the possibility of a pure, unbiased interpretation of a phenomenon. Simply put,

there are no innocent questions. Similarly, any presentation of data represents an array of choices (which material to include, which to cut) by the researcher. I posed questions and analyzed data through existing theory with reflexive awareness of my role as researcher in the interpretive process. With this in mind, I followed Heidegger’s (1996, p. 3) dictum that “every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought” (original work published 1927).

Results

Participants provided a general understanding of their attitudes toward classroom praise by responding to two Likert-type items on a seven-point scale, with 7 indicating *very true*, 4 indicating *somewhat true*, and 1 indicating *not true at all*. I calculated the sum of responses of 7, 6, and 5 (all indicating a relatively high level of perceived truth) to represent the level of consensus. Table 1 indicates that nearly all teachers (98%) frequently praise students in class.

Table 1

I frequently praise students in class. (7-point Likert scale)

	Percentage	Count
7 (Very true)	66.3%	69
6	23.1%	24
5	9.6%	10
4 (Somewhat true)	1%	1
3	0%	0
2	1%	1
1 (Not at all true)	0%	0
Total	100%	105

Similarly, Table 2 indicates that 93% of participants reported that praise effectively reinforces desired behavior of students.

Table 2

I believe that praise effectively reinforces desired behavior by my students. (7-point Likert)

	Percentage	Count
7 (Very true)	59.5%	62
6	23.1%	24
5	10.6%	11
4 (Somewhat true)	5.8%	6
3	1.9%	2
2	0%	0
1 (Not at all true)	0%	0
Total	100%	105

Open-Ended Responses

While the self-report measures provided a broad understanding of the teachers’ attitudes toward the use of praise in the classroom, open-ended written responses allowed for teachers to detail their specific approaches. The written responses also provided teachers a forum to articulate their thought processes, supplying justifications for the use of praise from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Open-ended written responses revealed three contrasting themes relating to the teachers’ approaches toward praise of students. These included praise for ability vs. praise for effort, non-specific vs. informational praise, and private vs. public

praise. With these contrasting categories, I allowed the teachers to speak for themselves, providing a detailed description of the phenomenon.

Praise for Ability vs. Praise for Effort. While teachers reported praising students equally for appropriate behavior and for academic success, there were few comments indicating direct praise for ability or intelligence. One teacher alluded to a practice along these lines, noting that she will “tell them how smart they are.” However, the vast majority of teachers preferred to praise for effort or improvement. One teacher expressed a circumspect approach to praise for effort, noting “Praise is not given in abundance to the point where the children feel it is just being used to be used. It is given for specific items directed at the individual child. If the child struggles to read and works hard they are praised.” Another teacher referenced acknowledging students “when they answer questions correctly or when they attempt to answer a question.” This aligns with another teacher’s statement concerning an individualized approach to verbal rewards, noting “I use praise as I see fit with each child. It is usually given when they accomplish something difficult for them or when they are doing what I asked them to do.”

Just as teachers reported praising students’ academic effort, several expressed how they praised efforts to improve behavior. One teacher summarized this approach, stating “I praise my students frequently for many different things—academically, socially (behavior to me and with their peers), improvement in various areas, and just overall good citizenship qualities.” Another provided a similar response, noting “Students are praised for their good behavior and for showing improvement if they’d been struggling.” This aligns with another teacher, who stressed the sincerity of complements, stating “I praise good behavior and encourage those who struggle. I am not fake about it—if I praise you for something, you’ve earned it.”

Non-Specific Praise vs. Informational Praise. While teachers reported their patterns of offering praise for both behavioral and academic merit, they also detailed the precise verbiage of their compliments. Teachers described a variety of praising words, both non-specific and informational. Teachers produced a substantial list of non-specific praise words and phrases, including “Good job!” . . . “That looks great!” . . . “Wow!” . . . “You are awesome!” . . . “Great answer!” . . . “Outstanding work!” . . . “Excellent job!” . . . “I know you can do it!” . . . “Keep it up!” One teacher provided justification for the frequency of praise, recommending “Lots and lots of praise all the time! A child thrives on positive reinforcement!” Another described how she combined a non-specific praise with a tangible reward, noting “I might tell a student what a good job they are doing or let them choose something from the treasure box for right answers.”

Although many teachers described the use of non-specific verbal rewards, a few specified an approach to praise that was informational, always referencing the reason of the praise. One teacher explained “When I see a student doing something correctly I mention their name and say what they are doing correctly . . . or I tell them ‘Good Job’, or ‘I like the way you are . . .’” Another teacher was even more specific, noting “I try to individualize it to give exact praise like, ‘I love your handwriting on this paper.’ Or, ‘I love how you are walking in star formation so well.’” Still another teacher reported her formula for informational praise, stating “When a child is doing the right thing, I often say, ‘I like the way _____ is (sitting on the carpet, standing in line, working quietly).’” On a similar note, a teacher linked informational praise to self-esteem, stating “Praise must be specific and consistent. Generic is too easy and even five-year-olds know its worth. One of a teacher’s most important functions should be to BUILD a child’s self-esteem, not damage it.”

Private Praise vs. Public Praise. In addition to describing the verbiage of both non-specific and informational praise, teachers made the distinction between private and public praise. While only a few teachers described instances of private praise, they did distinguish between verbal and written versions. One teacher explained that she considered the inclination of students, noting “Some prefer to be praised in private and some enjoy the attention from the class for positive behavior.” Although the teachers reported some private verbal praise, most came in the form of written notes, both to the student and parents. One teacher explained this practice, noting “I write positive notes on papers or in their planners.” Another provided additional details, explaining “Any time I see my kids doing a great job, helping each other, or being responsible, I either write them a little note saying how proud I am of them, or tell them personally when I see them!” Several teachers described offering indirect praise to students through their parents, often “in note form in their take-home folders, so that parents can see their success as well.” Another teacher described this practice in detail:

When I see a parent outside of school, I always try to make a positive statement about some aspect of behavior or academics. I also make phone calls in which I sandwich a negative behavior issue between two positive aspects about the student.

While a few advocated private praise—both spoken and written—the overwhelming majority of teachers preferred to make their words of praise public, often as an example for the entire group. One elementary teacher related a preference for positive, rather than negative reinforcement, typically in the form of public praise:

I try to notice good behavior and move the students up the behavior chart as often as possible. Instead of correcting the students who are misbehaving by saying, “No talking in the hallway, Skylar,” I try to keep my

comments more positive, by saying “Thank you, Joshua, for not talking in the hallway.” Usually the other students will notice and straighten up.

Another teacher described her animated style of drawing attention to positive student behavior, declaring “I am loud! So I will usually say ‘that’s awesome’ or a big ‘woo hoo!’ I always try to recognize great behavior or work out loud.” Still another teacher illustrated how she called attention to positive behavior that contrasted to the behavior of classmates:

I praise students who are doing the right thing when the majority of the class is not. I say something like . . . “I really appreciate how so-and-so is standing in line quietly, working hard on her assignment, etc.” I also use the term “being a good example” frequently. I have a few major behavioral concerns who are always in trouble for one thing or another, and I usually try to look for anything they are doing that is appropriate to praise so that they are not just getting negative attention.

The teachers were unified in their support of public praise, both for appropriate behavior and for academic success.

Discussion

The Discussion is divided into the three sections, according to the three basic human needs posited in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Recall that individuals perceiving themselves to possess high levels of *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* tend to feel self-determined and experience intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991). As I reviewed the participating teachers’ accounts of their application of praise in the classroom, I was first struck by the uniformity of their views. Self-report measures revealed a strong endorsement of praise as an effective motivator in the classroom setting. However, teachers’ open-

ended responses were somewhat mixed concerning the potentially undermining long-term effects of praise on intrinsic motivation. Perhaps most significant was the teachers’ view that praise can be effectively used to promote both academic and behavioral outcomes.

Autonomy

According to Deci et al., (1991), verbal rewards can be interpreted as either autonomy-supportive or controlling by students. With this in mind, individual students may internalize teacher praise quite differently. While some students may consider the frequent “good job!” to be a simple affirmation of understanding, others may perceive it as deeply controlling. Since this represents subjective interpretation on the part of students, the tone with which teachers deliver the praise is meaningful. In the present study, several teachers articulated the importance of “not being fake” about classroom praise. They seemed cognizant of the sophistication with which students view their words, indicating that students must “earn” praise, communicating a sense that verbal rewards are not bestowed lightly.

Although a few teachers described examples of private praise in the form of verbal and written comments, the vast majority firmly advocated public praise. According to the teachers, they “caught a student behaving well,” and made this fact known to the entire class. This approach may indeed be effective for students who receive little praise from home. However, according to Deci, Koestner, & Ryan (1999), such praise may have a strong controlling aspect, which would tend to undermine subsequent intrinsic motivation. Also, some students may find this type of overt praise to be embarrassing; others may learn to value the public praise more than the activity for which they earned that praise. By praising in public, the teachers leveraged a teachable moment, communicating success to the praised student, while also making overt the expectation for the other students in the class. This can be viewed as efficiency on the

part of teacher; it can also be seen as a short-term approach to motivation, which fails to address the consequences for students once the praise is removed.

Competence

While teachers strongly preferred public affirmation of student success, they expressed an inclination for praising effort over ability. This aligns with Mueller and Dweck (1998), who found that praise of ability undermined resilience after failure experiences. In the present study, teachers modified their approach to praise for specific students. For example, if a student had been receiving a barrage of negative feedback, teachers attempted “to look for anything they [were] doing that [was] appropriate.” This illustrates that the teachers praised for both effort and individual improvement. Although the ever-present “good job!” can promote the narrative of school as *work*, it can also be interpreted as an attempt to support the idea that success can be achieved through effort. The effectiveness of this technique would certainly depend upon the tone with which the praise was delivered, since some students may interpret the current praise as an underhanded insult of their past performance.

In addition to praising for effort and improvement, teachers described their techniques for praising “specific items,” often in formulaic fashion. This practice aligns with a body of research showing that informational praise tends to foster intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Students receiving specific and detailed feedback would certainly gain understanding of *why* they are receiving praise, which may improve their sense of competence for future activities. In the current study, teachers expressed preference for affirmative feedback, placing “a negative behavior issue between two positive aspects about the student.” This approach indicates that the teachers sought to “build a child’s self-esteem” through verbal rewards. Again, this technique may have a short-term positive effect on the student’s self-image. However, it could also represent

“manipulating children” and “creating praise junkies” (Kohn, 1993, p. 244) in the long-term.

Relatedness

While informational praise has been shown to foster subsequent intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999), the meaning of the transaction depends upon the relationship established between teacher and student (Reeve, 2006). According to Reeve, the administration of informational praise has the effect of mitigating the power relationship between student and teacher. Just by stating, “I like how you . . .,” the teachers in the present study demonstrated an autonomy-supportive, collaborative approach. Perhaps most important is the manner in which the teacher delivers the verbal reward. For example, “Thank you, Joshua, for not talking in the hallway” could have been expressed sarcastically or in a matter-of-fact tone. Only knowledge of the context between teacher and student could clarify the nature and effect of this praise.

Even with detailed informational comments, there is no way to completely avoid a power relationship between teacher and student, since the teacher alone expresses affirmation or correction. Recall Brophy’s (1981) statement concerning the affective nature of teacher praise, including “surprise, delight, [and] excitement” (P. 5-6). By making an emotional public display of student success, the teachers leveraged the students’ need for affirmation. In addition, they created context where students established a hierarchy of relative achievement. While an individual student received verbal reinforcement, the other students who observed the public display acquired a meaningful confirmation as well.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the data come from a single school district, one would expect similar accounts in most classrooms across the United States. Future research could expand the sample to a range of public and private

schools. In addition, it would be instructive to consider the use of praise throughout the entire k-12 spectrum, focusing on the qualitatively different forms that emerge at the high school level. One could also gain meaningful insight into the phenomenon by observing the use of praise in action within an elementary classroom, paying particular attention to the level of autonomy-support vs. control exhibited by teachers. Research could also uncover the motivational link between the home and school by comparing the use of praise in both settings. On a broader scale, it would be instructive to learn the extent to which heightened incentivizing of education through praise represents a peculiarly American phenomenon. One could compare levels of praise by teachers in various countries, such as Germany, Japan, and China, who have high-stakes summative assessments similar to those in the United States. Finally, research should explore approaches such as Montessori, where teachers apply informational, rather than evaluative feedback, and minimize the imposition of incentives for learning (Montessori, 1912).

Conclusion and Implications

While the present study was exploratory in nature, it confirmed many suspicions that I had about the use of praise in the elementary classroom. It also confirmed the fact that self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is an appropriate lens through which to understand the phenomenon. Although substantial research from the past four decades has shown the unintended consequences of extrinsic motivators, such as praise, in the educational setting (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999), the practice has continued, both in the face-to-face and virtual learning environments.

I framed this study with Montessori's (1967) appeal for teachers to resist interrupting engaged students through verbal rewards. Based upon a career of observing children engaged in learning, Montessori (1989) declared "A child does not need praise; praise breaks the enchantment" (p. 16).

Although a body of research suggests that there may be unintended consequences for exposing students to a barrage of kind and encouraging words (Kohn, 1993), educators appear to have chosen expediency over students' long-term motivation to learn. If the current study is representative of the greater school community, we may be witnessing a devaluation of the intrinsic affirmation of the learning moment.

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