University of
Strathclyde
Glasgow

Strathprints Institutional Repository

Maclellan, Effie (2006) *An educational warning : praising pupils may be bad for their progress.* Education Today, 56 (1). pp. 13-16. ISSN 0013-1547

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

Department of Educational Studies
University of Strathclyde

Dr Effie Maclellan,
Reader in Education,
Department of Educational Studies,
University of Strathclyde,
(Jordanhill Campus)
Southbrae Drive,
GLASGOW G13 1PP
Tel: 0141 950 3355
Fax: 0141 950 3367
E-mail e.maclellan@strath.ac.uk

Abstract: This article argues that the teacher is not well served by relying on simplistic and common sense understandings of the construct of praise. *Person-praise* is useful when pupils are experiencing success but unhelpful when faced with failure or confronted by setback. However, *process-praise* can enable pupils to see that they are important agents in their own behaviour/successful academic achievement. Given the considerable and increasing complexity of the teacher's role in today's society, the teacher's sophisticated use of praise would seem to be an important pedagogical tool.

Introduction

Understandably in today's society, we are concerned with how to motivate pupils both in terms of improving achievement and encouraging socially acceptable behaviour. It would not be unreasonable for teachers (and the wider society) to puzzle over why some pupils complete tasks despite enormous difficulty while others give up at the slightest provocation or why some pupils set such unrealistically high goals for themselves that failure is an inevitable consequence. The primacy of motivation is reflected in many of the official documents, both within and beyond the United Kingdom, which outline the need for curriculum reform. The importance of motivation is in the evidence for its power to influence academic achievement (Brophy, 1999; Graham & Weiner, 1996; Hattie, 2003; Pajares, 2001). However, motivation is not a 'thing' that we can see. It doesn't have a reality that we can point to. It is a psychological idea, a psychological construct that we use to explain why people behave as they do. Because it is a psychological idea rather than a real, concrete thing that we can see, there is debate about precisely how we can motivate learners. This article draws on the psychological literature to explore the use of praise as a motivating mechanism and elaborates on how teachers might think further about their use of praise.

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

Conventional views of motivation make two major assumptions. Firstly they assume that if learning has taken place, individuals must have been motivated. Secondly they assume that the drive and enthusiasm on the part of learners to engage in learning is always fostered through incentives that the environment offers for engaging in learning. These incentives and the procedures for managing them are referred to as reinforcement in the behaviourist literature and are often described as rewards in the pedagogical literature (for example McGrath, 2000). One manifestation of a reinforcer or a reward is praise. Understandings of motivation as it is conventionally conceived have led, not surprisingly, to a common belief that teachers can do nothing better than to praise pupils for doing well or even for approximating to doing well. Conversely, the complimentary, common-sense belief is that criticism is deflating, unhelpful and consequentially 'bad'. The extensive literature on the effects of praise and criticism is entirely consistent with our now deeply ingrained views that giving praise is good, and maybe even necessary, and that being critical makes people more vulnerable (Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Koestner et al, 1987, 1989; Schunk, 1994; Seligman et al, 1995). While a conventional view of motivation is eschewed in this article, it is important to be clear why undifferentiated use of praise is an inadequate motivator given that it is typically embedded in grading practices, class competition, the use of gold stars, and the breaking down of complex tasks and concepts into smaller components as mechanisms to promote achievement; phenomena that are common in current educational practice (James & Gipps, 1998).

In terms of improving academic achievement, there are a number of difficulties in using praise. First, when pupils rely on teachers (or other authority figures) for approval, they try to 'read' the teacher for signs of approval such that the energy expended on gaining favourable, and avoiding negative, judgments of their competence detracts from genuine learning (Dweck, 2000; Pintrich, 2003). Second, praise can cause pupils to focus on extrinsic rewards rather than on the intrinsic value (interest or liking) of the academic work (Ryan et al, 1985). Third, praise can interrupt pupils' concentration and therefore be intrusive (Biederman et al, 1994). Fourth, praise can be counterproductive in that pupils may only work for the praise rather than generalise from the immediate situation to other related ones (Wolery et al, 1998) and finally, praise can teach pupils to repeat the activity that secures praise rather than encourage them to extend themselves (Ames & Ames, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 1985;Dweck, 2000; Fields & Boesser, 1998).

In terms of encouraging socially acceptable behaviour, there are further difficulties. Praise from teachers tells pupils that teachers are judging them and therefore that teachers' judgements are more important than those of pupils. In implying that teachers have some special competence to judge, teacher praise creates an unequal power relationship (Ginott,

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

1972). This can be both threatening to, and manipulative of, pupils who may perceive themselves to be externally rather than internally controlled (Ryan et al, 1985). Additionally, considerable skill is needed in administering praise to avoid it becoming automatic and meaningless or unfairly attributed (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). The actual or perceived power of the teacher to administer praise therefore has the potential to be psychologically damaging to pupils if the standards that teachers are setting in their use of praise are unrealistically high. Pupils' fear of failure to meet such high expectations may result in feelings of discouragement or result in socially unacceptable behaviour.

While teachers may intend, very sincerely, that their praise have positive effects on both academic achievement and socially acceptable behaviour, Brophy's (1981) review of the literature on teachers' use of praise indicates that it is not systematic and is typically administered infrequently, noncontingently, globally rather than specifically, and is determined more by the pupils' personal qualities or teachers' perceptions of pupils' need for praise than by the quality of pupils' achievement or conduct. While this review is now more than twenty years old, more up-to date literature does not contradict the findings that many teachers still:

- give praise to low achievers, even when their work is incorrect

- give positive verbal praise accompanied by inconsistent non-verbal behaviour

- do not use praise in a systematically scientific way to capitalise on such benefits as a behaviourist framework can offer.

The realisation that unqualified praise may be a simplistic attempt to empower pupils which results in their fearing failure, avoiding risks, and coping badly with setbacks (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998) challenges us to reconsider the role of praise. Indeed, there is evidence (Howard et al, 1999; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Luthar et al, 2000; Masten, 2001) to suggest that pupils learn to deal effectively with setbacks and failure not by receiving the social and emotional support/comfort that might be intended when giving praise, but through specific help with the particular difficulties that they are experiencing. In other words the behaviour/errors that give rise to setbacks and failure should not be viewed as pathological symptoms from which pupils have to be shielded but as the focus for subsequent improvement and achievement. This then suggests that while our common sense views about praise are intuitively appealing, they are not altogether helpful. This is not intended to suggest that praise is always inappropriate or that praise is, by definition, bad. What it does mean, however, is that praise cannot be understood as a stand-alone application to be enacted solely through a set of procedures. Rather, the effects of praise need to be understood in a

3

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

more sophisticated and differentiated way. It was precisely this understanding that Dweck and her colleagues sought.

In a series of experimental studies Dweck and her colleagues had pupils experience different form of praise and criticism for their achievements. The two main forms of praise to cause different responses from the pupils were what Dweck calls person praise and process praise. In person praise the pupils were told that they were good or smart or wonderful. In other words the praise was directed at the pupils globally as when they were told, "You're a good boy/girl", "I'm very proud of you" or "You're very good at this". In process praise, the feedback was directed at the effort or strategy used by the pupils as when they were told, "You tried really hard" or "You found a good way to do this. Can you think of other ways that would also work?" The two main forms of criticism were person-oriented criticism and strategy, or process, criticism. Person-oriented criticism expressed a global evaluation of the pupil's performance taking the form of "I'm very disappointed in you" after some task had been incompletely carried out. In process criticism pupils' attention was drawn to the specifics of what was incomplete about the task as in, "Your hands still have paint on them and the so does the table" but this was immediately followed up with, "Maybe you could think of *another* way to clean yourself and the painting area". So this form of criticism contained two essential features: drawing attention to the error/mistake and asking the pupil to think of an alternative solution strategy.

On the basis of pupils being randomly grouped and experiencing only one type of praise or of criticism, the authors (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998) draw a number of conclusions from the findings:

- person-oriented praise, while positively and enjoyably experienced by recipients in the immediacy of the successfully completed task, leaves pupils vulnerable in the face of subsequent difficulty because they interpret such praise to be deep-seated, intractable and all important,

- person-oriented praise is a very fragile motivator because its frequent use will encourage pupils to protect positive feedback by avoiding challenging tasks, thereby orienting them to performance goals

- having received person criticism in the past increases the likelihood that current mistakes are seen as failures whilst having received process criticism leaves the individual able to generate constructive solutions to errors;

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

- not only does person criticism encourage one to view one's performance less positively but such criticism negatively influences self-perceptions, causing feelings of being 'not good', 'not smart', 'not nice';

- the type of criticism experienced influences not only one's affect and self-perception but also influences subsequent behaviour in terms of persisting with or desisting from the setback,

Implications for teachers' practices

These differences between different types of praise and criticism tell a consistent story. Feedback that centres pupils on themselves confirms a belief in fixed intelligence with all of its vulnerabilities while feedback that focuses pupils on effort promotes a belief in malleable intelligence with all of its benefits. If the findings of Dweck and her colleagues are to be incorporated into practice that promotes both academic achievement and socially acceptable behaviour, the following principles are implied:

- Process praise will develop only when policy and practice privilege learning or mastery goals. With such goals pupils do not perceive failure as a personal, negative judgement but rather as an indication of insufficient effort or inappropriate strategy choice. The recognition that errors are an inevitable part of learning allows pupils to make progress because they are not shackled with worrying doubts about their ability. Since ability can always be improved, through the power of effort, task difficulty is not viewed as an insurmountable obstacle but rather as an opportunity for increased and improved learning. Unfortunately, much of what passes as education today requires pupils to demonstrate how smart or bright or clever they *appear* to be, through exemplary performance. Unsurprisingly, the system encourages pupils to choose 'safe', selected tasks at which they will succeed (because failure is too costly) and so these pupils can never really find out if they could do more.

- Praise is most helpful when it is process praise which gives specific feedback on the effort and energy expended on carrying out a task. This feedback is not acknowledging low-challenge, low-effort, error-free success but is drawing attention to what pupils did successfully in the face of challenge and demand. If tasks have underestimated the challenge level for particular pupils, these should be explicitly acknowledged as in, for example, "Sorry I wasted your time with a task that is too simple for you".

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

- Person praise tells pupils that they are praiseworthy only when they carry out tasks quickly, easily and perfectly. This does not enable pupils to embrace learning and challenge. Praise that conveys the importance of strategy choice and effort on the part of pupils can be effectively communicated to pupils by careful teacher judgement of how much help to give in the enactment of classroom tasks. This is not to suggest that the teacher should desist completely from providing help, but the non-judicious provision of teacher help, particularly if unsolicited by pupils, can imply that pupil difficulty is due to low, fixed ability. On the other hand, by requiring pupils to engage in the task, and make their own sense of it, they are learning that sufficient effort might be needed from them. This then suggests that we be clear about what we are meaning and doing when engaging in such ubiquitous but ill defined teacher tasks of 'monitoring', 'helping' or 'providing support'.

- Criticism is equally useful when it is process criticism and draws attention to what the pupil did not do successfully. So feedback along the line of "well that strategy didn't work", "what can we try now?" "that tells us we used the wrong strategy" makes clear that both teacher and pupil use mistakes as the platform from which to launch an alternative strategy. This type of feedback enables us to appreciate that ambiguity and confusion are integral stages in learning.

- Praise is helpful following success (to indicate that success can be repeated) and failure (to overcome mistakes). But praise following failure has to be carefully delivered. If the praise is of the variety, "Well done, you did your best" the message conveyed is one of the teacher's pity, thereby confirming to the pupil that the mistakes were due to fixed ability and unavoidable, and not the responsibility of the pupil. Equally, it is not helpful merely to tell pupils to try harder because this conveys no information about how effort might be expended, and is tantamount to person praise. This in turn implies that the process praise is demanding of the teacher: both to steer pupils towards the malleable intelligence view and to enable pupils to develop the strategies which will support them.

Conclusion

The motivation of pupils is extremely important. No sane teacher or school official would deny this assertion. However, there is room for debate about how best to motivate pupils. Common-sense and history suggest that motivation is achieved and improved by letting pupils experience lots of successes. Furthermore, this experience of success is allegedly enhanced by the excessive and indiscriminate use of praise. Given the not inconsiderable levels of

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

functional illiteracy and increasing school violence (to name but only two issues that plague our educational system), it is clear that a common-sense understanding of motivation is not enough. This article has argued that a more differentiated understanding of praise and criticism can enable teachers to be more effective and strategic in their motivation of pupils, though this cannot occur without significantly changed intentions for educational and pedagogical policy.

References

Ames, R. & Ames, C., (Eds.) (1984) *Research on Motivation in Education*. Orlando FL: Academic Press.

Biederman, G., Davey, V., Ryder, C. & Franchi, D. (1994) The negative effect of positive reinforcement in teaching children with developmental delay. *Exceptional Children*, 60 (5) 458-65

Brophy, J. (1981) Teacher praise: a functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research*. 51 (1) 5-32

Brophy, J. (1999) Toward a model of the value aspects of motivation in education. *Educational Psychologist*, 34 (2): 75-85.

Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (1985) Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour, New York: Plenum Press.

Dweck, C. (1975) The role of expectations and attributions in the alleviation of learned helplessness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, 674-85.

Dweck, C. (2000) *Self-Theories*. London: Psychology Press.

Dweck, C. & Reppucci, N. (1973) Learned helplessness and reinforcement responsibility in children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 25, 109-16.

Fields & Boesser, C. (1998) *Constructive Guidance and Discipline.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Ginott, H. (1972) *Teacher and Child*. New York: Macmillan.

Graham, S. & Weiner, B. (1996) Theories and principles of motivation, in D. Berlinner & R. Calfee (Eds) *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, pp. 63-84, New York: Macmillan

Hattie, J. (2003) Teachers Make a Difference: What does the research tell us? *Australian Council for Educational Research Conference*, 19th-21st October, Melbourne.

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

Hitz, R. & Driscoll, A. (1988) Praise or encouragement? *Young Children*, 43 (5) 6-13.

Howard, S., Dryden, J. & Johnson, B. (1999) Childhood resilience: review and critique of the literature. *Oxford Review of Education*, 25 (3): 307-323.

Howard, S. & Johnson, B. (2000) What makes the difference? *Educational Studies*, 26 (3): 321-337.

James, M. & Gipps, C. (1998) Broadening the basis of assessment to prevent the narrowing of learning, *The Curriculum Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Autumn, pp. 285-297.

Kamins, M. & Dweck, C. (1999) Person versus process praise and criticism: implications for contingent self-worth and coping. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(3), 835-47.

Koestner, R., Zuckerman, M. & Koestner, J. (1987) Praise, involvement and intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53(2), 383-90.

Luthar, S., Cicchetti, D. & Becker, B. (2000) The construct of resilience: a critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71 (3): 543-562.

Masten, A. (2001) Ordinary magic. *American Psychologist*, 56 (3): 227-238.

McGrath, M. (2000) *The Art of Teaching Peacefully in the Primary School: improving behaviour and preserving motivation*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Mueller, C. & Dweck, C. (1998) Praise for intelligence can undermine motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 33-52.

Pajares, F. (2001) Toward a positive psychology of academic motivation. *Journal of Educational Research,* 95 (1): 27-35.

Pintrich, P. (2003) Multiple goals and multiple pathways in the development of motivation and self-regulated learning. *Development and Motivation*, 2: 137-153.

Ryan, R., Connell, J. & Deci, E. (1985) A motivational analysis of self-determination and self-regulation. In: C.Ames & R.Ames (Eds.) *Research on Motivation in Education*, Volume 2, pp. 13-51. Orlando FL: Academic Press.

Seligman, M., Reivich, K., Jaycox, L. & Gilham, J. (1995) *The Optimistic Child*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Educational Warning: Praising pupils may be bad for their progress

Schunk, D. (1994) Self-regulation of self-efficacy and attributions in academic settings. In D. Schunk & B. Zimmerman (Eds.) *Self-regulation of Learning and Performance: Issues and Educational Applications,* pp. 75-99. Hillsdale, NJ. Erlbaum.

Wolery, M., Bailey, D. & Sugai, G (1998) *Effective Teaching*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

FINAL DRAFT 2005