Teacher Praise: An Efficient Tool to Motivate Students

As the majority of states across America adopt the Common Core Standards for reading and mathematics, teachers at all grade levels are eager to find tools that will encourage students to work harder to reach those ambitious outcome goals. Additionally, schools adopting Response to Intervention are seeking evidence-based strategies to motivate struggling students that can also be easily delivered in general-education classrooms.

Teacher praise is one tool that can be a powerful motivator for students. Surprisingly, research suggests that praise is underused in both general- and special-education classrooms (Brophy, 1981; Hawkins & Heflin, 2011; Kern, 2007). This guide offers recommendations to instructors for using praise to maximize its positive impact.

Praise: What the Research Says

Effective teacher praise consists of two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher approval (Brophy, 1981; Burnett, 2001). The power of praise in changing student behavior is that it both indicates teacher approval and informs the student about how the praised academic performance or behavior conforms to teacher expectations (Burnett, 2001). As with any potential classroom reinforcer, praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance—but only if the *student* finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little et al., 2004). Here are several suggestions for shaping praise to increase its effectiveness:

- **Describe Noteworthy Student Behavior**. Praise statements that lack a specific account of student behavior in observable terms are compromised—as they fail to give students performance feedback to guide their learning. For example, a praise statement such as *'Good job!'* is inadequate because it lacks a behavioral description (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). However, such a statement becomes acceptable when expanded to include a behavioral element: *"You located eight strong source documents for your essay. Good job!"*

- **Praise Effort and Accomplishment, Not Ability.** There is some evidence that praise statements about general ability can actually reduce student appetite for risk-taking (Burnett, 2001). Therefore, teachers should generally steer clear of praise that includes assumptions about global student ability (e.g., "*You are a really good math student!*"; "*I can tell from this essay that writing is no problem for you.*"). Praise should instead focus on specific examples of student effort or accomplishment (e.g., *"It's obvious from your grade that you worked hard to prepare for this quiz. Great work!"*). When praise singles out exertion and work-products, it can help students to see a direct link between the effort that they invest in a task and improved academic or behavioral performance.

- **Match the Method of Praise Delivery to Student Preferences**. Teachers can deliver praise in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, an instructor may choose to praise a student in front of a class or work group or may instead deliver that praise in a private conversation or as written feedback on the student's assignment. When possible, the teacher should determine and abide by a student's preferences for receiving individual praise. It is worth noting that, while most students in elementary grades may easily accept public praise, evidence suggests that middle and high-school students actually prefer private praise (Burnett, 2001). So, when in doubt with older students, deliver praise in private rather than in public.

Praise: Use in the Classroom

Praise is a powerful motivating tool because it allows the teacher to selectively encourage different aspects of student production or output. For example, the teacher may use praise to boost the student's performance, praising effort, accuracy, or speed on an assignment. Or the teacher may instead single out the student's work product and use praise to underscore how closely the actual product matches an external standard or goal set by the student. The table below presents descriptions of several types of praise-statements tied to various student goals:

Praise: Goal	Example
Student Performance: Effort. Learning a new skill requires that the student work hard and put forth considerable effort--while often not seeing immediate improvement. For beginning learners, teacher praise can motivate and offer encouragement by focusing on effort ('seat-time') rather than on product (Daly et al., 2007).	"*Today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period. I appreciate your hard work.*"
Student Performance: Accuracy. When learning new academic material or behaviors, students move through distinct stages (Haring et al., 1978). Of these stages, the first and most challenging for struggling learners is acquisition. In the acquisition stage, the student is learning the rudiments of the skill and strives to respond correctly. The teacher can provide encouragement to students in this first stage of learning by praising student growth in *accuracy* of responding.	*"This week you were able to correctly define 15 of 20 biology terms. That is up from 8 last week. Terrific progress!"*
Student Performance: Fluency. When the student has progressed beyond the acquisition stage, the new goal may be to promote fluency (Haring et al., 1978). Teacher praise can motivate the student to become more efficient on the academic task by emphasizing that learner's gains in fluency (a combination of accuracy and speed of responding).	*"You were able to compute 36 correct digits in two minutes on today's math time drill worksheet. That's 4 digits more than earlier this week--impressive!"*
Work Product: Student Goal-Setting. A motivating strategy for a reluctant learner is to have him or her set a goal before undertaking an academic task and then to report out at the conclusion of the task about whether the goal was reached. The teacher can then increase the motivating power of student goal-setting by offering praise when the student successfully sets and attains a goal. The praise statement states the original student goal and describes how the product has met the goal.	*"At the start of class, you set the goal of completing an outline for your paper. And I can see that the outline that you produced today looks great—it is well-structured and organized."*
Work Product: Using External Standard. Teacher praise often evaluates the student work product against some external standard. Praise tied to an external standard reminds the student that objective expectations exist for academic or behavioral performance (e.g., Common Core State Standards in reading and mathematics) and provides information about how closely the student's current performance conforms to those expectations. When comparing student work to an external standard, the teacher praise-	*"On this assignment, I can see that you successfully converted the original fractions to equivalent fractions before you subtracted. Congratulations—you just showed mastery of one of our state Grade 5 math standards!"*

statement identifies the external standard and describes how closely the student's work has come to meeting the standard.	

Praise: Troubleshooting

One reason that praise is often underused in middle and high school classrooms may be that teachers find it very difficult both to deliver effective group instruction and to provide (and keep track of) praise to individual students. Here are several informal self-monitoring ideas to help teachers to use praise with greater frequency and consistency:

- **Keep Daily Score.** The teacher sets a goal of the number of praise-statements that he or she would like to deliver during a class period. During class, the teacher keeps a tally of praise statements delivered and compares that total to the goal.

- **Select Students for Praise: Goal-Setting and Checkup.** Before each class, the teacher jots down the names of 4-5 students to single out for praise. (This activity can be done routinely as an extension of lesson-planning.) After the class, the teacher engages in self-monitoring by returning to this list and placing a checkmark next to the names of those students whom he or she actually praised at least once during the class period.

- **Make It Habit-Forming: Tie Praise to Classroom Routines.** Like any other behavior, praise can be delivered more consistently when it becomes a habit. Here is an idea that takes advantage of the power of habit-formation by weaving praise into classroom routine: (1) The teacher first defines various typical classroom activities during which praise is to be delivered (e.g., large-group instruction; student cooperative-learning activities; independent seatwork, etc.). (2) For each type of activity, the teacher decides on a minimum number of group and/or individual praise statements that the instructor would like to deliver each day or class period as a part of the instructional routine (e.g., 'Large-group instruction: 5 praise-statements or more to the class or individual students', 'Independent seatwork: 4 praise-statements or more to individual students'). (3) The teacher initially monitors the number of praise-statements actually delivered during each activity and strives to bring those totals into alignment with the minimum levels previously established as goals. (4) As delivery of praise becomes associated with specific activities, the onset of a particular class activity such as large-group instruction serves as a reminder (trigger or stimulus) to deliver praise. In effect, praise becomes a habit embedded in classroom routine.

References

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