1. Chapter 1: Praise - The Controversy

Introduction

Praise:

- Verbal or written statements that recognize a desired behavior
- Statements that communicate positive feedback

(Simonsen et al., 2010)

Transcript:

Most teachers would agree that it’s a good thing for students to receive positive reinforcement and encouragement. Many teachers do this by giving students praise.

In this module, when we refer to praise we’re talking about verbal or written statements that acknowledge or positively recognize a desired behavior.

You could also think of praise as, “Statements that communicate positive feedback” (Simonsen et al., 2010).
Purpose of Praise

Transcript:

Most teachers give praise for two reasons: to increase positive academic and social behaviors, and to build students' belief in their ability to meet challenges (Bartholomew, 1993; Simonsen et al., 2010; Strain & Joseph, 2004).

But in recent years, praise has become a somewhat controversial topic within education. Some scholars have begun to question the value of praise, and even asserted that it could be harmful to students' academic growth and motivation.
**Criticisms of Praise**

(Kohn, 2001; Larrivee, 2002)

**Transcript:**

Critics have claimed that when praise is used as a “verbal reward,” it destroys intrinsic motivation. That is, students only perform the task to receive the praise, not for the enjoyment of learning. They also claim that it can turn students into “praise junkies” who need constant positive reinforcement in order to sustain their motivation (Kohn, 2001; Larrivee, 2002).

However, other scholars have argued that praise is an effective teaching strategy that is supported by research.
To begin with, in many classrooms the negative or corrective statements teachers make to their students vastly outnumber the positive ones. In fact, one study found that in some classrooms serving students with special needs, there were twenty reprimands for every one positive comment (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011).

A different study examined teachers’ use of praise statements with middle school students. It revealed that teacher-delivered praise increased engagement by 31%, and reduced disruptive behavior by 20% (Blaze et al., 2014).
Transcript:

Numerous other studies have shown that giving students praise for a positive behavior increases the likelihood that it will continue - both in the short term and the long-term (Strain & Joseph, 2004).

Finally, scholars have argued that all children - and particularly young children - are still developing their social/emotional skills and sometimes need external validation. They’ve also found that students who hear positive praise statements from the adults in their lives are more likely to use them with their peers (Strain & Joseph, 2004).
Chapter 2: Characteristics of Effective Praise

Analogy

Transcript:

Here’s an analogy: In some ways, praise is like a very sharp kitchen knife. Highly effective if used correctly; ineffective - and possibly dangerous - if used incorrectly.

In the remainder of this module, you are going to learn how to use praise effectively with your students.
Explore

Characteristics of Effective Praise

Specific  Contingent  Sensitive

Transcript:

This table lists the main characteristics of effective praise. For the next few minutes, we’re going to explore each of these characteristics in greater depth.

Specific Praise

Primary

Middle-Grades

Secondary

» Proceed
Transcript:

Praise should be “behavior-specific.” That is, it should identify and reinforce the behavior that elicited the praise. Click to see examples of what specific praise looks like at different grade levels.

Specific Praise Wrap-up

- Teacher called attention to desired behaviors.
- Described positive actions and validated efforts.
- Will increase the likelihood that behavior will continue.

Transcript:

In each of these examples, the teacher’s words called attention to the desired behavior. They described exactly what the student was doing that was positive, and validated the student’s efforts. When giving praise,
specifying what the student is doing well increases the likelihood that he or she will do it again.

**Contingent Praise**

Praise is Contingent if:

- It is given after the behavior has occurred.
- It is linked to the behavior that prompted it.

**Transcript:**

Praise should be contingent. That means it should be given after the positive behavior has occurred, and explicitly linked to that behavior. Students must be able to make a connection between the praise they receive and what they did to earn it.

Praising students for meaningless or low-effort tasks dilutes its value, and may even convey low expectations.
Sensitive Praise

Tips for Sensitive Praise:

- Observe your students
- Ask your students how they would like to receive praise.
- Be sincere

Transcript:

Praise should be sensitive to the needs and preferences of the individual student. Some students might not like being praised in front of their peers, and prefer to receive praise in more private, one-on-one interactions with the teacher (Gable et al., 2009; Moore-Partin et al., 2010).

Here are some tips for being sensitive in your use of praise:

First, observe your students. See how they react to the praise statements you make. Learn what they like receiving recognition or validation for. Second, don’t be afraid to ask your students how they like to receive praise. The question could be as simple as, “How would you like me to let you know when you’re doing a good job?” Third, be sincere. Praise should always be genuine, and come from a desire to acknowledge a student’s positive actions or effort. If students perceive that the praise is exaggerated or manipulative, its value could be destroyed.
Check for Understanding

“That's a strong example because... (explains why).”

“Thanks for raising your hand and waiting patiently to ask your question. I appreciate it.”

Privately to a student: “Thanks for your participation today. For each point you made, you cited relevant evidence from the text.”

Transcript:
Let’s pause for a moment to check for understanding. Here are three sample praise statements. Check the criteria that each one meets.

Feedback

“That's a strong example because... (explains why).”

“Thanks for raising your hand and waiting patiently to ask your question. I appreciate it.”

Privately to a student: “Thanks for your participation today. For each point you made, you cited relevant evidence from the text.”
First Example of Praise

This praise is specific because it explains what makes the student's example strong. It is contingent because it occurs after the student's response has been given. There is not enough information to determine if the praise is sensitive to the specific preferences of the learner.
Second Example of Praise

**Check for Understanding**

“Thats a strong example because... (explains why).”

“Thanks for raising your hand and waiting patiently to ask your question. I appreciate it.”

Privately to a student: “Thanks for your participation today. For each point you made, you cited relevant evidence from the text.”

This praise is specific because it identifies the desired behavior (raising hand and waiting patiently to ask a question) and is given after the desired behavior has occurred. There is not enough information to determine if the praise is sensitive to the specific preferences of the learner.

Third Example of Praise

**Check for Understanding**

“Thats a strong example because... (explains why).”

“Thanks for raising your hand and waiting patiently to ask your question. I appreciate it.”

Privately to a student: “Thanks for your participation today. For each point you made, you cited relevant evidence from the text.”

This praise is specific because it identifies the desired behaviors (participating in class discussion, supporting ideas with evidence from text) and occurs after they have been demonstrated. The praise is given privately, which demonstrates a possible sensitivity to the learner’s preferences with respect to public vs. private praise.
Chapter 3: Characteristics of Ineffective Praise

Generic Praise

Characteristics of Ineffective Praise

- Generic
- Inflated
- Manipulative

Transcript:

Just as there are some things that make praise effective, there are also some things that can make it ineffective. Let’s talk about some of the characteristics of ineffective praise.

Praise is generic if it is non-specific and gives no feedback about what the student did well. If the student is unsure of exactly what he did well or what made it good, it will be difficult for him to intentionally perform the behavior again.
There’s another problem with generic praise, and it can be seen in examples like this:

- “You are such a good reader!”
- “You are so good at math!”
- “That was such a smart answer!”
- “What a brilliant comment!”

The problem with generic statements like these is that they praise an intrinsic attribute or ability, rather than a student’s effort. Receiving praise statements like this can cause students to develop a fixed view of intelligence. They can come to believe that the reason they perform well on something is because they are innately “good” at it, and the reason they perform poorly is because they’re just “bad” at it (Bayat, 2011).

For this reason, praise should be specific and descriptive, and focus on the process rather than the person.

**Inflated Praise**

“Your answers are always spot-on!”

“You are SO smart!”

“That’s the very best response I’ve heard all day!”

“This is fantastic work!”

→ Proceed
Problems with Inflated Praise:

- Can devalue praise over time
- Can cause children to avoid challenging tasks

Transcript:

Praise is inflated if a teacher uses extreme language to deliver it. For example: “Your answers are always spot-on!” “This is fantastic work!” “That’s the very best response I’ve heard all day!” “You are SO smart!” Each of these statements contains intensifying adverbs like “so” or “very,” or superlatives like “always,” “fantastic,” or “best” (Bartholomew, 1993). There are two problems with inflating praise by using extreme language. The first is that it often makes the praise seem disproportionate to the level of effort expended to get it. For example, a student reminds the teacher to change the date on the white board and the teacher responds with “Good catch! You are SO smart.” Interactions like this can devalue a teacher’s praise statements over time.

The second problem with inflated praise is that some students interpret it as a demand for constant exceptional performance (Brummelman et al., 2014). For example, if my teacher tells me that “My answers are always spot-on,” I may feel pressured to only give correct answers. This could make me reluctant to participate or offer an answer if I’m unsure whether it’s 100% correct.

If the goal of praise is to increase desired behaviors and build students’ belief in their own ability, the best thing to do is be as specific and descriptive as possible without adding extreme language.
**Manipulative Praise**

Transcript:

Praise can backfire if students interpret it as a form of manipulation whose sole purpose is to control their behavior. This can happen if teachers continually give praise for low-effort, low-challenge tasks, or if praise is treated as a “verbal reward” for behavioral compliance. Here are some examples:

- “You’re doing a great job of raising your hands today!”
- “Good line-walking! Keep it up!”
- “Lisa is paying attention right now. I wonder who else is sitting perfectly in her seat…”
- “The first group to put away their materials gets a high-five! Who wants a high five?!?!?”

Now, to clarify. It’s not that a teacher should never make statements like this. And, if your students are struggling to perform a particular behavior, it’s completely appropriate to use praise as a way of reinforcing it. The question a teacher must ask him or herself is, “Why am I using praise and how am I using it?”

Praise is manipulative if a teacher uses it as a form of behavioral control. When a teacher says something like “You’re doing a great job of raising your hand” or “I wonder who is sitting perfectly in her seat,” the message to students is, “If you do what I want, I’ll reward you with a compliment.” The value of doing this erodes over time, as verbal rewards inevitably lose their value.

Instead, think of praise as a way of affirming students’ positive choices. The end goal is not to control behavior, but to make students feel valued, and increase their self-efficacy.
Check for Understanding

“Outstanding work.”

- “I know you spent a lot of time on this. The level of detail went beyond what was required by the rubric.”
- “You had the best project in the entire class. Every part of it was excellent!”
- “Everything was turned in on time and complete. Terrific job!”

Transcript:

Before we move on, let’s pause once more to check for understanding. Here is a piece of not-particularly-effective praise.

Which of the following examples does the best job of re-stating the praise to make it more effective?

Feedback
First Statement Feedback

This is specific, non-inflated praise. The teacher avoids extreme language and focuses on the student’s effort. The praise highlights two positive behaviors – taking the time to do thorough work, and exceeding the requirements of the assignment.
Second Statement Feedback

This praise is still generic and inflated. The teacher tells the student that she submitted the best project, but does not specify what made it strong.

Third Statement Feedback

This is an example of praise that is disproportionate to the behavior. In this class, it is hopefully an expectation that students turn in their work complete and on-time. Telling a student "Terrific job!" for meeting a minimum expectation conveys low expectations and can diminish the value of the praise.
Chapter 4: Extended Practice

Options

Click on the example you would like to explore.

Elementary    Secondary

Transcript:

You will now have an opportunity to evaluate a teacher’s use of praise based on the criteria you just learned about. Choose an elementary or secondary example, depending on what is most relevant to you.

Elementary Introduction
Transcript:

In this video, a teacher has a group of students model their solutions to some math review problems on her board. You will see her ask each student to solve a problem and explain his or her thinking. As they finish, she gives feedback and praise.

Click to watch the video, and then check off all of the characteristics of praise - both effective and ineffective - that you are able to observe.

Elementary Video

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Transcript:

Student: Twenty-four cents I counted out so I just needed to get 95 cents I only needed to add a dollar.

Teacher: Alright I think you deserve a purple point for that. You are on fire.

Teacher: A lot of you said 71 cents so you stopped before you actually answered the question. Yeah, she did find 71 cents under the couch cushion but the question asks you how much more money does she need to make it up to a dollar and 95 cents and Anthony's explanation was perfect.

Teacher: Number 4 - Erlinda.

Erlinda: Daniella bought a bag of candies. The bag contains 24 pieces of candy. If she makes 6 bags how many can she put in each bag so that everyone gets an equal share?

Student: Four because she said she has 6 bags, so I counted it 123456 so I counted all the way to 24 and my answer was 4.

Teacher: Perfect. Thank you for explaining this. And number 5...Christina.

Christina: 9 divided by I mean 36 divided by 9 equals 4. I knew that was 4 was my quotient because I drew the 9 circles and then counted until I got to 36.

Teacher: Ok, thank you.
Elementary Check

Click on any criterion for feedback on why it was or was not met.

Transcript:

No audio

Specific Feedback

The teacher made general comments like "Perfect," "Very good," and "Beautiful" but did not specify what was good about the responses.
### Contingent Feedback

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<th>Ineffective Praise</th>
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**Contingent**

All praise statements were contingent because they were delivered after the students responded.

**Proceed**

### Sensitive Feedback

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**Sensitive**

There is not enough evidence to determine if the teacher's praise was sensitive to students' preferences.

**Proceed**
Generic Feedback

Effective Praise  Ineffective Praise

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Generic

The teacher’s praise statements generally don’t specify what the student did well other than answer the question correctly.

Inflated Feedback

Effective Praise  Ineffective Praise

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Inflated

Words like “Perfect” and “On fire” could be examples of inflated praise.
In this video, a high school language arts teacher is reviewing the “Do Now” - or warm-up activity - with her students. She is teaching students how to use re-reading and process of elimination to rule out distractors when answering multiple choice questions.

As they review the Do Now, the teacher gives feedback and praise to her students.

Click to watch the video, and then check off all of the characteristics of praise - both positive and negative - that you are able to observe.

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For a complete list of references, refer to the On-Demand Module ‘Giving Effective Praise.’
Teacher: Which answer option makes no sense at all? Mario?
Mario: B, Black holes do not exist.
Good job. We need to get rid of that. Those bullet points don't tell us that they don't exist. Why would they write this whole passage about that? What else can we eliminate, Salma?
Salma: B, no light can escape from a black hole.
Teacher: Excellent. Didn’t it talk about that in a bullet point or something? Yeah and how we had a whole bullet point about how light is used in black holes. Ok, so what else? That leaves us with a 50 50 shot at a correct answer. So we have option A: black holes are difficult to find or C: black holes do exist? Which answer makes the most sense as the correct selection for our choice?
Sia:  A, black holes are difficult to find.
Teacher: A, black holes are difficult to find.
Teacher: What do we need to do after we circle our answer? What is our next step? Salma, what is our next step after we circle our answer?
Student: We have to write the specifics for how we got our answer.
Teacher: Yeah, we have to write our justification. So what should we write? What did you guys write down?
Kayla: We wrote down that in the passage it says black holes are small and light years away.
Teacher: In the passage it says and repeat what you said one more time.
Kayla: Black holes are small and light years away.
Teacher: Good work!
Secondary Check

Click on any criterion for feedback on why it was or was not met.

Transcript:
No audio

Specific Feedback

The teacher made general comments like “Excellent,” “Good job,” and “Good work” but did not specify what was good about the responses or ask students to explain their thinking.
Contingent Feedback

Contingent

The teacher used statements such as “excellent” and “good work” as contingent praise when students gave a correct response or correctly followed a step.

Sensitive Feedback

Sensitive

There is not enough evidence to determine if the teacher’s praise was sensitive to students’ preferences.
### Generic Feedback

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**Generic**

The teacher's praise statements generally don't specify what the student did well other than answer the question correctly.

### Inflated Feedback

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**Inflated**

The teacher used the word "excellent" three times in three minutes. Generally speaking, over-using specific praise words can diminish their value.
Chapter 5: Final Suggestions

Conclusion

Transcript:

The purpose of this module is not to send the message that it’s never okay to say “Good job,” or that using a word like “Excellent” will cause irreparable harm to a student.

Rather, the point is to be cognizant of what we’re saying and doing when we praise students. Over time, some actions tend to be more effective while others tend to be less effective. And in general, we should strive to do
two things:

First, proactively identify the academic and social behaviors that we want to reinforce through praise. These should be behaviors that are valued by your classroom community, and that will facilitate students’ social and academic success (Bayat, 2011).

Second, deliver praise that is specific, contingent, and sensitive to the recipient.

If you do these things, you will be well on your way toward creating a classroom culture where students feel validated and affirmed, and where they are motivated to give their best effort.