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Praise and Feedback in the Primary Classroom: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This small scale qualitative study investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of praise and feedback in the classroom using structured interviews and classroom observation. A case study approach was used whereby students and teachers from one school participated. Some 56 students and five teachers were interviewed individually or in small groups. The findings suggested that several factors need to be considered when using praise and feedback in the primary classroom. Careful deliberation should be given to the type of praise and feedback used by teachers in their classrooms and when and how it should be used. Younger students prefer 'ability' feedback, and as they grow older their preference for 'effort' feedback increases. Most importantly, general, non-targeted praise was most commonly used in the classroom, but this type of praise is not effective because it is not linked to a specific behaviour or targeted to the successful completion of a task. The results of this study suggest that teachers should use less general, non-targeted praise, more effort and ability feedback, and give more ability than effort feedback to younger students (grades 1-4) and more effort than ability feedback to older students (grades 5-7).

INTRODUCTION

Research into the use of praise in the classroom has been ongoing since Brophy's (1981) seminal work outlined a functional analysis of teacher praise and feedback. Burnett (2001, 2002) conducted quantitative questionnaire-based studies that investigated primary students' preferences for teacher praise as well as the relationships between teacher praise and feedback and students' perceptions of their relationship with their teacher and their classroom environment. In these two studies data were collected about the use of general, non-targeted praise (excellent, well done, that's great), negative feedback (that's not good enough, that's untidy work), 'effort' feedback (you're working hard on your reading) and 'ability' feedback (you're really smart at maths).

How do students wish to be praised?

Burnett (2001) reported that 91% of 747 Australian children wanted to be praised for their achievements and behaviours. Interestingly, most (52%) wanted to be praised quietly and

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individually while only 32% wanted to be praised loudly in front of their peers. Some 17 % did not want to be praised at all either individually or publicly. Burnett postulated that these findings suggested that some students find public praise uncomfortable or even punishing, particularly if peers use what teachers say to belittle or bully the student outside of class time (White & Jones, 2000). Burnett related the phenomenon of belittling those who do well to the “tall-poppy syndrome” (Feather, 1998; Peeters, 2004), which involves cutting down anything that sticks its head up above the rest, like a tall poppy. Furthermore, contrary to US data (Craven, Marsh & Debus, 1991), 84% of the Australian students surveyed preferred to be praised for trying hard (effort feedback) as opposed to being given ability feedback. The results of this study suggest that teachers should be strategic when giving students praise and feedback. Teachers should *not* assume that all children want to be praised loudly and publicly for being smart. Conversely, if primary teachers were to praise students quietly and individually for their efforts, then the majority of students’ preferences would be met.

Effort or Ability Feedback

Many students (91%) reported wanting to be praised often or sometimes for being smart and clever at their schoolwork (ability feedback), but when given the choice between receiving effort or ability feedback, a strong preference for receiving effort feedback was evident (Burnett, 2001). Contrary to this finding, Craven, Marsh, and Debus (1991) noted US data suggesting that ability feedback was most valued by students and was the dominant influence for the development of self-concepts in specific subject areas. The argument here is that students need to receive ability feedback from significant others in order to develop a positive concept of themselves as being competent and good at certain things. Supporting this view was Burnett (2003) who found that students who reported receiving low levels of ability feedback in maths and reading from their teachers had negative maths and reading self-talk and reported that they were not good at those subjects.

Other research has supported the use of ability feedback in the classroom. Fredenburg, Lee, and Solmon (2002) indicated that students determine their ability to perform a particular task through their cognitive appraisal of available information, including sources such as feedback provided by teachers or significant others. While Freedman-Doan et al. (2000) discovered that when the children were asked “how do they know that they are the best at an activity they selected?” 46% answered that feedback about their ability was the reason they believed they were the best. This study involved interviews with 865, 1st, 2nd, and 4th grade students.

Not all research is supportive of ability feedback. Mueller and Dweck (1998) conducted a series of studies with nine to 11 year old students and found that students provided with ability feedback and then a subsequent failure experience did not perform well after the failure, while those who received effort feedback did perform well following a failure experience. Those students who received only ability feedback and then failed attributed their failure to not being smart; had a decline in performance after the failure and lied about their results after the failure. The results of the six studies reported by Mueller and Dweck (1998) suggested that only providing ability feedback has negative consequences particularly when followed by failure experience.

The Impact of Praise and Feedback

Burnett (2002) used structural equation modelling to investigate the relationships between feedback and students’ perceptions of their relationship with their teacher and the classroom environment. The results demonstrated that negative teacher feedback and effort feedback were related to their relationship with the teacher. Students who reported a positive relationship with their teacher perceived that their teacher gave them extensive effort feedback and little negative feedback. Additionally, students who reported that their classroom was a positive environment reported a positive relationship with their teacher and perceived that their teacher gave them a great deal of ability feedback. Interestingly, general, non-targeted praise was not related to

either the relationship with teacher or classroom environment, and ability feedback was unrelated to the relationship with their teacher.

Burnett (2001) noted that the status of ability feedback as a self-concept enhancer and a useful classroom strategy is currently in limbo given Mueller and Dweck's (1998) concerns plus the findings that students have a strong preference to receive effort feedback and that ability feedback is unrelated to the relationship with the teacher. Burnett noted that further research is needed to investigate why students prefer effort feedback to ability feedback and to test the veracity of the tall poppy syndrome hypothesis. Additionally, the vast majority of studies investigating teacher praise and feedback in the classroom have employed quantitative measures that assess students' perceptions of the frequency and type of interactions they have with their teacher, but have not observed teacher behaviour in the classroom.

The Problem with General Praise

In a recent review of the power of feedback reported by Hattie and Timperley (2007), four separate foci for classroom feedback were presented. Three of the four types of feedback highlighted relate to providing feedback at the instructional level connected to learning and skill development. The fourth involves providing feedback about the student as a person. They noted that personal feedback such as "good girl" or "great effort" typically expresses positive evaluations and feelings about the student but contains little task-related information. This type of feedback is rarely converted into increased engagement, commitment to learning, enhanced self-perceptions or deeper understanding about the task. General praise addressed to students is unlikely to be effective for learning or for overall development of the self. Finally, Hattie and Timperley (2007, p.100) noted the overall observation, "it is difficult to document the frequency of feedback in the classrooms, except to note that it is low".

Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to qualitatively investigate students' and teachers' perceptions of praise and feedback and to observe teachers' use of praise and feedback in the classroom. The role and importance of ability feedback will be explored, as will the students' reasons as to why they prefer one type of feedback to another. The specific research questions are: (1) What are students' perspectives of effective types of praise? What are students' responses to praise? What are students' preferences for ability or effort feedback? (2) What are teachers' perspectives of the use of praise and feedback in their classroom? (3) How often do teachers use praise and feedback in the classroom?

METHOD

Participants

A sample of 56 students in grades 1 to 6 (aged 6 to 12 years) was randomly selected from a single primary school in rural Australia to participate in this study. Twenty-nine of the students had individual interviews and 27 students participated in a group interview with four or five students of similar age. There were 30 (54%) boys and 26 (46%) girls. Five teachers (one male and four females) took part in interviews as well as classroom observation. One teacher taught reading recovery; therefore classroom observation in this case was one-on-one.

Instrumentation

Structured interview questions were used for the students' (individual and group) and the teachers' interviews to ensure consistency in the questions asked. The questions (see Appendix 1) canvass a range of issues regarding the use of praise in the classroom. All interviews were audio-recorded and the information transcribed under the headings of the questions. The Chief Investigator conducted the teacher interviews, which were approximately 20-30 minutes each while the Research Assistant conducted the student group and individual interviews, which were approximately 10-15 minutes each.

The Structural Observational Schedule (SOS) (Appendix 2) was used in the classroom observations and was undertaken by the Research Assistant. This schedule is based on Observing Pupils and Teachers In Classrooms (OPTIC) (Merrett & Wheldall, 1986), and was modified to record academic focussed feedback/praise by teachers. The schedule looked at the types of feedback/praise given, and the four categories observed were: Ability Feedback (“Gee you are a good reader”, “You have the skills to be good in Maths”, “You seem very smart in Sciences”); Effort Feedback (“You’ve been working hard”, “Your results in math reflect the great effort you have put in”, “You are a hard worker in reading”); General Praise (“Lovely work”, “Well done”, “Keep up the good work”) and Negative statement (“Come on, you can do better than that”, “That’s very untidy work”, “That’s not good enough”).

Procedures

Interviews were conducted in a private room and were audio-recorded. Student interviews, both individual and group, were done during class time while teacher interviews were run prior to the start of school. Observations were conducted twice a week for four continuous weeks totalling four hours of observation per class. A complete classroom observation took 30 minutes, done in six blocks of five minutes each. The observer paid attention to the teacher only in order to record the teachers’ responses to the students. The Research Assistant conducted all classroom observations using the SOS. Ethics approval and voluntary consent were obtained.

Data Analysis

The information from the transcribed interviews was reviewed and summarised under the heading of each question. Once the individual student and group interview data had been summarised an integrated summary was prepared. Each teacher interview transcript was individually reviewed then a summary was completed combining all the teachers’ responses under the heading of the questions.

RESULTS

The results from the interviews and observations are presented using the three main questions given earlier: 1. a) What are students’ perspectives of effective types of praise? b) What are students’ responses to praise? c) What are students’ preferences for ability or effort feedback? 2. What are teachers’ perspectives of the use of praise and feedback in their classroom? 3. How often do teachers use praise and feedback in the classroom?

Students’ Perspectives of Effective types of praise.

The younger students, years 1 and 2, felt that the teacher should praise them for what they termed ‘good behaviour’. Good behaviour was described by the students as “being good, sitting up straight, following instructions, being nice to others, not talking, putting up their hand and neat work”. However, by year 3 the students felt that the teacher should praise them for completing their work on time, trying their best and for having a positive attitude. The younger students also liked the tangible praise, such as receiving a sticker or stamp or the teacher saying ‘good work’, ‘well done’ or ‘excellent’. By year 5 the students interviewed felt that teachers should be praising them for achieving a goal, completing assignments and for the effort that they have put into their work.

Students’ responses to praise.

Students indicated that they felt good when they were praised. Many commented that they felt proud of themselves, it was motivating (they wanted to try harder to get more praise) and that they generally felt good inside. One comment from a year 1 student stated that they felt guilty or caught out when praised. The student explained that this feeling happened when they got praised for the first time, but subsequent praise was okay. None of the students indicated that they did not like to be praised.

Ability or Effort Feedback?

The results of this study indicated that the participants had a preference (57%) for effort feedback over ability feedback. The younger children, in years 1 and 2, lean towards the ability feedback (“Your reading is very good, you’re very clever in reading”), where the older children have a preference for effort feedback (“Your putting a lot of effort into your reading, you’ve been working hard on your reading”). A comment from a year 5 student was interesting: the student stated that he would rather be praised for working hard, but if it’s a subject in which he was good, he would like to be told that he was clever. When the students were questioned whether they preferred to be praised publicly or privately, 60% preferred private praise and 40% preferred public praise.

Teachers’ Perspectives

Teachers’ perspectives of the use of ability and effort feedback in their classrooms varied. Two of the teachers felt that they used both ability and effort feedback equally in their classroom. One teacher felt that a child with academic ability still needed effort feedback to push them farther, while the other teacher indicated that she used the terms “ability” and “effort” with the children and praised for both academic and social responses. The other three teachers felt they used effort feedback more. One felt that if they used just ability, some children would not receive any praise. Two teachers commented that they felt younger children preferred to be praised for effort; as they got older they had a preference for ability because they became more academically focused.

The types of behaviours teachers felt were more likely to be praised varied according to grade level. For the younger students it was following instructions, positive conduct and generally a wide variety of behaviours. As the students got older, teachers indicated that they would praise those students who showed initiative, tried their best, put effort into their work and who achieved their goals.

Use of Praise in the Classroom

Based on the classroom observations undertaken in this study, the most prevalent praise was general praise, ranging from 71% to 93% of all feedback in each classroom. Accordingly, the observations showed that effort and ability feedback were used less than 10% of the time. The frequencies of the types of praise (General, Negative, Ability and Effort) used by the teachers are outlined in Table 1. These results indicate that 89% of the feedback observed was positive and 11% negative. Positive feedback (General, Ability and Effort) was delivered at an average rate of 40 instances per hour. Given an average class size of 25 and an even distribution of statements (highly unlikely), each student would receive less than two positive statements per hour and one negative statement every five hours, or a ratio of eight positives to each negative in a five hour day. Interestingly, the reading recovery teacher gave twice as much praise and feedback to their individual students than occurred in the other classrooms observed.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative study confirm many of the quantitative results presented by Burnett (2001, 2002, 2003). Specifically, younger students had a stronger preference for ability feedback than older students and most students (60%) preferred to be praised privately and quietly rather than loudly. In keeping with Schunk’s (1991) hypothesis, two of the teachers commented that they thought younger children preferred effort feedback and that students’ preference for ability feedback would increase as they became more competent and academically able. However, Burnett’s (2001) conclusions and the findings of this study do not support this view. Younger students appear to prefer ability feedback while older students prefer effort feedback.

Folmer et al. (2008) reported similar findings in a study of children’s (aged 5 -15) perspectives of effort and ability. Age-related differences in the understanding of effort and

Table 1. Frequency of Praise and Negative Statements Used by the Teachers in the Classroom Observations

		Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4		Total	% of Class
		Ob 1	Ob 2	Ob 3	Ob 4	Ob 5	Ob 6	Ob 7	Ob 8		
Teacher 1	General	11	7	11	6	17	16	13	25	106	71
	Negative	2	4	2	3	1	2	6	7	27	18
	Ability	0	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	6	4
	Effort	0	1	1	1	4	0	2	1	10	7
										149	
Teacher 2	General	10	19	14	15	20	8	33	17	136	80
	Negative	4	4	3	4	7	1	2	2	27	16
	Ability	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
	Effort	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	5	3
										170	
Teacher 3	General	15	28	13	16	9	7	18	24	130	93
	Negative	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	2	7	5
	Ability	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Effort	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1
										140	
Teacher 4	General	12	3	16	25	20	2	10	18	106	82
	Negative	5	1	1	4	8	2	0	0	21	16
	Ability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Effort	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
										129	
Teacher 5	General	23	30	26	31	17	33	23	33	216	68
	Negative	4	4	1	2	4	0	4	1	20	6
	Ability	8	5	9	5	7	4	3	7	48	15
	Effort	6	10	7	7	3	0	0	2	35	11
										319	
Grand Total										907	

Percent of Total Observations:

General Praise	77%
Negative Statements	11%
Ability Praise	6%
Effort Praise	6%

ability feedback lead older and younger children to adopt very different self-protection strategies. Younger children associated ability with hard work whereas older children commonly believed that more capable students do not need to apply much effort. White and Jones (2000) documented the importance of recognising the developmental trend in which young children (4 to 9-year-olds) tend to interpret teacher praise at face value while older children (11 or 12-year-olds) perceive praise for mediocre classroom performance as a signal of pity. Interestingly, both the students and teachers had similar views about the types of behaviours that should be praised – both groups indicated that behaviour was important for younger students, and as students grow older, effort and the attainment of a goal should become the focus.

The main finding of this study was that general, non-targeted praise was the dominant type of feedback used by teachers, 77% of the time or on average 35 times per hour. Low levels of behaviour-specific praise were similarly observed in Sutherland, Wehby, and Yoder's (2002) assessment of teacher behaviour. Interestingly, Burnett's (2002) finding that general praise was not predictive of a positive classroom environment or having a positive relationship with a teacher raises further questions about the impact of general praise. The relatively low utilisation of ability and effort feedback (12% in total) was on par with the utilisation of negative statements (11%) with both types of feedback on average being used once per student per five-hour academic day.

Conclusion

In this study, general, non-targeted praise was most popular with teachers. However, many researchers (Brophy, 1981; Gable et al. 2009; Hattie & Timperley 2007; Kalis, Vannest, & Parker 2007; Lannie, & McCurdy, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2005) have consistently reported that general praise is not effective unless it is contingent on a behaviour or targeted on a task. Mueller and Dweck (1998) argued against using ability feedback because of its damaging impact after a failure is encountered and supported the use of effort feedback in the classroom. However, in this study only 6% of the feedback given to students focussed on effort and was given publicly, which most students do not prefer. Teachers should not use general, non-targeted praise and should use ability feedback for younger students (grades 1-4) and effort feedback for older students (grades 5-7) despite their limitations. Effort and ability feedback are an important part of classroom feedback despite both having strengths and limitations.

Further Research

Research is needed to investigate the impact of private effort and ability feedback on students' behaviour, self-perspectives and academic achievement. In addition, further investigation is needed into the specific conditions under which primary teachers use praise, for what extrinsic or intrinsic purposes, and the contexts where primary students appreciate being praised. Furthermore, the focus of this study was on academic feedback, not social feedback, therefore further investigation of the use of feedback in all classroom contexts using a larger research sample is recommended. This small-scale study was conducted in one school and hence the results have limited applicability to other contexts.

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Biographical Notes

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APPENDIX 1

For the group interview the following questions were asked:

- 1) Could you tell me what you think about praise in your classroom?
- 2) How do you like to be praised?
- 3) How often should your teacher praise you?
- 4) What types of behaviour should your teacher praise?
- 5) Do some students receive more praise than others do?
- 6) What types of behaviours are these students more likely to be praised for?

The questions for the individual interviews were:

- 1) How do you like your teacher to praise you?
- 2) How do you feel when your teacher praises you?
- 3) Would you rather be praised for being clever or for trying hard?
- 4) You just got 10 out of 10 for a mathematics test. What would your teacher say?
- 5) Your teacher has just praised you in front of the class for being smart and clever. How would this make you feel?
- 6) Do some students receive more praise than others?
- 7) What types of behaviour are these students more likely to be praised for?

The teacher interview questions consisted of:

- 1) What do you think about the use of praise in the classroom?
- 2) How do you use praise in your classroom?
- 3) What are the advantages of using these methods?
- 4) What are the disadvantages of using these methods?
- 5) Do some students receive more praise than others do?
- 6) What types of behaviours are these students more likely to be praised for?
- 7) Teachers can use ability and effort feedback in their classrooms. What kinds of feedback are you more likely to use?

APPENDIX 2

STRUCTURED OBSERVATIONAL SCHEDULE (SOS)

School _____ Class _____
 Teacher _____ Date _____ Time _____
 No. of children present _____ Observer _____
 Nature of lesson _____

Teacher Behaviours

ACADEMIC

Ability					Effort					General Praise					Negative Statement				
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10	6	7	8	9	10

Totals			