Is Praise ALWAYS Positive?

by: Peggy Bennett

No. Surprisingly, praise can have potentially negative rather than positive effects on a student’s learning, motivation and self-concept. Few would argue that each of us likes to be liked, recognized, accepted, appreciated and valued. To accommodate these needs, we praise each other, complimenting ourselves and our achievements. While the intent of praise may be positive, the function, especially in groups, can be negative.

For building a case on this point, praise is defined as “any statement that makes a positive evaluation of an object, person, act or event, and that contains very little supplementary information.” (Farson, 1968, p. 112) Therefore, a quality that is missing in praise statements is the constructive information that provides helpful feedback for students’ learning.

Because praising students is expected teacher behavior, consideration of the negative messages that some students receive from praise seems imperative. Only by knowing how our words are heard and what messages we are giving in the classroom can we maximize on teaching and learning.**

In order to gain a more complete notion of how praise functions in classroom settings, some of its perils are discussed here. Consider these ideas as potential feelings that can result from students being praised by a teacher.

Feelings of Embarrassment

Have you ever been embarrassed by a compliment? “You played so beautifully. You are very talented!” Some adults are so uncomfortable receiving praise that they quickly “cancel” compliments: “Oh, I have so far to go. I really didn’t play all that well.”

Students also can be highly sensitive to receiving compliments, especially in group settings. “That was a wonderful answer, Grant. I can tell you’ve done your homework!” Exuberant praise can imply that the teacher is surprised at an accomplishment because she actually had lower expectations. Occasionally, feelings of antagonism can result when some students feel unworthy of praise and therefore, disagree with a teacher’s complimentary assessment. Not wanting to be singled out, considered “teacher’s pet,” or “held up” to the class as an example can make praise an unwelcome “gift” from the teacher to a student. Praise can feel embarrassing.

Constructive information, delivered with an encouraging tone of voice and facial expression, can provide necessary feedback, yet minimize feelings of separation and embarrassment for students. Substitute statements for praise could include:

“Your answer shows that you are thinking, Grant.”

“Your answer was very clearly worded. It seems as if you understand that concept.”

“That performance demonstrated clear tone, strong breath support and accurate rhythms. Good work!”

Feelings of Manipulation

Have you ever sensed that a person was complimenting you just because they wanted you to do something for them? “You are so good at organizing, would you be in charge?” Praise can also be used as a controlling mechanism: “I know you wouldn’t do such a thing. You’re much too smart for that!” As teachers we recognize how negative these types of praise can feel. They can also feel negative to our students.

In the past several years, an increasingly popular phrase to use with younger children is “I like the way ...” as in “I like the way Tara is sitting quietly, ready to listen.” This phrase points out the behavior of one or several children so that others will notice and do the same. Often the short term results are imitation by the other children and speedy classroom management. The long-term effect on children, however, is that they should behave in a certain manner because that is what the teacher likes. Their behavior, then, is geared toward meeting others’ approval. Students can become conditioned to working for the teacher’s approval, and praise is reserved for only those who meet it. Praise can feel manipulative.

One could question the wisdom of using praise to control behavior. Farson expressed concern that teachers were using praise as a “piece of psychological candy” to get students to comply with behavioral expectations (Farson, 1968, p. 112). A report on “Praise and Concrete Rewards: Concerns for Childhood Education” cited several studies in which researchers concluded that students’ motivation actually decreased when praise and rewards were given for inherently interesting tasks (Cannella, 1986). Ironically, praise has the potential of impeding motivation, deflecting learning, and reducing self-esteem - the opposite effect from what is intended.

By pointing out what behavior is observed and how it contributes to the lesson or the achievements of the group, the emphasis of praise can be continued...
become sensitive to the gradations of cause feelings of inferiority.

"Several students are ready to begin."

"The violins have tuned and are saving us valuable rehearsal time."

"I'm hearing lots of breath energy from this area of the room. That helps your singing."

**Feelings of Inferiority**

Have you noticed that certain compliments on your work or your achievements seem to establish the superiority of the person delivering the compliment? "That was the best I've ever heard your group sound. You are really improving!" Although given as a "positive," praise such as this can feel very negative. And, when the superiority of the praiser is implied, feelings of defensiveness and antagonism can soon be added to those of inferiority for the person receiving the praise.

In classroom settings, students can become sensitive to the gradations of praise that a teacher uses: "Sarah, that was excellent! ... Good job, Janet! ... you're trying, Anita! ... Wonderful, David!" When praise is used excessively, a teacher can find herself "trapped" into continuing her pattern of praising, yet recognizing the need to be honest. When one student is given superlative praise, anything less can sound as if she is being criticized as to the other students. Resentment toward the teacher and the student being praised can easily get the message that they (as persons) are better or worse than others. Non-specific praise that unintentionally focuses on personal qualities rather than accomplishments can magnify this dilemma: "Good girl, Lisa! ... You sure are a smart boy, Tommy! ... You are so good!" Soon, students are in competition with each other for "winning" the teacher's praise and approval. Praise can cause feelings of superiority.

Because praise can be interpreted as "I am good," some students become addicted to teachers' (and other adults') approval of them and their work. The absence of praise, especially superlative praise, is seen by these students as a negative evaluation. Helping students gain self-satisfaction from their work is a worthy goal. Teachers must monitor the extent to which their use of praise might be impeding progress toward this goal.

**Habitual Praise**

Have you noticed that some adults are so generous and so non-selective with praise that their compliments have little or no meaning to you? "Great! ... Wonderful ... Good!" Some teachers may not realize that these "filler" compliments have become habitual in their teaching. When teachers' "automatic" praise statements follow students' performances/responses, they become distracting mannerisms that carry little or no meaning for students.

Watch the position your hand is in when you sing the high So."

**Feelings of Superiority**

Have you noticed that it can become tempting to equate your being good at something with your sense of being a good person? "You are a wonderful conductor!" can be heard as "I am wonderful!" Conversely, "You are not a good enough performer" can feel like the criticism, "I must not be good enough." As teachers, we know the negative side-effects of allowing our self-esteem to be vulnerable to and dependent upon our accomplishments. Are we taking care not to give our students these messages?

"Knowledge does not make one good. The lack of it does not make one bad." (Charles, 1985, p. 55) Based on the praise statements of teachers, students can easily get the message that they (as persons) are better or worse than others. Non-specific praise that unintentionally focuses on personal qualities rather than accomplishments can magnify this dilemma: "Good girl, Lisa! ... You sure are a smart boy, Tommy! ... You are so good!" Soon, students are in competition with each other for "winning" the teacher's praise and approval. Praise can cause feelings of superiority.

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**Listening to Ourselves**

Listen to how frequently you praise your students. Listen also to the quality of those praise statements. Often, a teacher's first response to rethinking praise is, "I'm afraid to say anything anymore!" When we try to change our patterns of teaching, it can seem as if everything done in the past was "bad" and must be rejected. That is not the intended message here. Nor is the message to delete encouraging, complimentary comments from our teaching — these are necessary.

Praise has its profits, and few teachers or students are unaware of those benefits. Because praise is seldom criticized, the perils of praise in classroom settings may not be commonly known (Bennett, 1988). Awareness and sensitivity to how praise is being heard and understood by our students is a first step to avoiding these perils. A second step is substituting constructive information for vague compliments. By upgrading praise to substantive feedback, teachers can encourage students' learning in a setting of acceptance, group cooperation, and mutual appreciation.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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