

## Re appraising praise

As more and more teachers embrace the praise culture, seduced by its inherent goodness and deceptive simplicity, it may be time to take stock. Giving praise is a more complex process than at first sight particularly in the emotional minefield of the classroom. Praise can create either a bond or a barrier between teacher and pupil.

Praise can quickly be rebuffed as patronising, inaccurate or grudging. If the teacher is just going through the motions, praise will come across as hackneyed and lacking spontaneity. Credibility and sincerity are a must or praise can be as offensive as empty compliments or ill-considered gifts, each of which signify that the donor doesn't really know the subject. Private forms of praise have the advantage that their value is not derived at the expense of others. The impact of praise can be heightened by smiling, warmth in the eyes or a pat on the back. Like most things, regular moderation is better than praise binges. Excessive praise may pressurise pupils to perform even better next time. Praise should focus on the task at hand, rather than linking performance to future success. Flattery maybe gets you anywhere with colleagues. It works because they realise it is just a game like flirting and enjoy the playful element. It wouldn't work with children who can detect plastic praise, i.e. praise that just looks like the real thing.

The benefits of praise can be eroded in various ways. For example when the frustrated teacher asks the "ah but" question, such as "ah but why can't you do that all the time?" Contaminated praise is telegraphed by qualifiers such as 'but' and 'why' that twist praise into criticism. Praise is a common strategy to boost self-esteem but some pupils can't cope with it as it threatens their view of themselves as unworthy. Praise can also be non-contingent i.e. not dependent on pupil performance but rather on such things as the teacher's mood. It doesn't let pupils know what they've done to be successful and leaves uncertainty.

Common sense would suggest it is a good idea to praise pupils for being clever, to help make them feel smart and build their confidence. Such ability praise however can suggest success is due to qualities pupils have rather than something they've done. It may lead children to concentrate on showing their ability rather than on learning. Even worse it can unwittingly teach pupils to measure their ability from their performance. They may also come to see ability as something they can't change. It can backfire by making children equate success with high ability but also failure with low ability. This can make them put any failure down to their low ability which leads them to give up in the face of setbacks.

Person praise such as 'you're a kind boy' misses the opportunity of commenting on the real accomplishment. Praising personal qualities may carry the same message as judgemental criticism: that you can be judged as a person from your performance. So if pupils perform poorly, they may turn the positive judgement into a negative one.

Confidence in ability is only useful when pupils are doing well. It is more important to be confident in one's capacity to deal with difficulties and to know that you will progress if you apply yourself and use the right approaches, especially when the going gets tough. This is more likely to result from praise for effort. Praise for effort also encourages children to concentrate on learning as opposed to showing off their ability and to put down their performance to effort that can be varied under their control. Praise is best focused on pupils' efforts and strategies, on the process of their work and how they persisted rather than their ability. Pupils who are praised for effort will be more likely to think failure means they need to try harder. It is unfortunate that so many schools give effort awards as the 'booby' prize.

Effective praise doesn't stop at 'well done' but goes on to say why the pupil is being praised. The teacher says 'Good, you made a plan, so now you know what to do as you go along.' Praise is only as good as the information it imparts. Telling a pupil that he is working like a Trojan is only motivating if the pupil knows what a Trojan is!

To assume that teachers should give praise freely and avoid criticism overlooks the fact that indiscriminate praise for easy work can suggest low ability while criticism can be used judiciously to convey a belief that children can do better with more effort.

Praise is essentially a form of valuing; it's original meaning was an expression of worth. There is a subtle but significant difference between controlling praise that gives approval to achieve conformity and encouraging praise that recognises pupil's efforts to increase self-confidence. And it is quite a skill to give the latter. Too much controlling praise can teach children they have to please adults to be approved. Pupils don't need to earn encouragement. It can be given for nothing, something special, for effort or improvement, when the pupil is doing well or even making mistakes. Encouragement, like a well chosen gift will rarely be rejected. Teachers encourage pupils when they have faith in or notice pupils' efforts and their feelings. Encouragement helps children feel valued just for being themselves, to learn to appreciate their special qualities and to feel capable.

The power of praise is set significantly by the teacher/pupil relationship. The more engaging that relationship and the more pupils respect the teacher the more they will value and be affirmed by any praise offered. The essence of an encouraging relationship is showing an interest in the person as an individual while praising specific aspects of his or her performance, never comparing the individual to others. This not only rewards children for their work, but teaches them values and builds confidence that will serve them well in the future.

