

Do we praise children too much?¹

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In the public debate, it is claimed from time to time that we have a generation of self-absorbed and narcissistic children and young people. It is pointed out that indiscriminate and excessive use of praise and encouragement of children, both in nursery, school and at home is the main cause of this. Do we praise children too often, or do we praise them in an inefficient and inappropriate manner? I will in this article argue to the contrary: that we praise children too little and when we do praise it is often done inaccurately and ineffectively. I will look at the advantages of using praise, as well as some of the typical loop holes and obstacles that stops us from using praise. Based on current research, theory and from many years experience as a teacher and counsellor, I argue that praise used effectively will enhance a good learning environment and personal growth. The article is based on a booklet titled "What we know about the use of recognition, praise and clear rules in the classroom" (Tveit, A. 2010, Dafolo publishers). This is part of a series of booklets published by the LP model² in Denmark with Thomas Nordahl and Ole Hansen as editors.

Use of praise and recognition are widely accepted as a basic human need and an important and necessary part of our culture and upbringing (Nordahl 2002, Johannessen 2007, Lyngø 2007). At the same time criticism is raised from various quarters against a one-sided and superficial use of these tools and concepts (Juul 1995, Good and Brophy 2000, Henderlong and Lepper 2002). Much of the criticism is based on different use and understanding of the concepts of praise, recognition and encouragement. Although I am aware of these differences I choose to use the term praise as a common concept, and will first discuss the different concepts and criticisms.

There is wide agreement that the motivation and recognition of students through specific praise and encouragement is a key principle of good classroom management (Arnesen, Ogden and Sørli, 2006, Nordahl, Sørli, Manger, Tveit 2005, Webster-Stratton 2005). Praise is one of several proactive educational measures that can facilitate students to succeed and cope in the classroom. In many schools there are different practices and different understanding about fundamental educational principles. Effort to develop a common practice in these areas

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² The LP model is an evidence based model focusing on the learning environment and teacher group reflection and analysis of their own practice. The model is widely implemented in Norwegian and Danish schools.

with the support of all staff members is a time consuming and complex process. Such a process will have to take place on several levels and involve parents and students in addition to the employees of the school. Working with praise, recognition and encouragement should therefore be viewed in the context of more comprehensive and school-wide prevention efforts based on the available knowledge on effective approaches and programmes. (Knudsmoen, Holth, Nissen, Schultz, Torsheim and Tveit 2006).

Why praise, encouragement and recognition are important

The use of praise, encouragement and recognition in school is helpful for three main reasons: as a motivator, as a reinforcer and to build relationships. Praise and recognition is motivating and helps to enhance the students' efforts and coping abilities (Henderlong and Lipper 2002, Webster-Stratton 2005, Arnesen et.al 2006). When the feedback is specific, supportive and non-evaluative it has a significant effect on student learning (Bergkast, Dahl and Hansen 2009). In a study comparing three schools with many behavioural problems and three schools with few behavioural problems the researchers found that the use of praise and encouragement was one of several factors that contributed to a good learning environment and learning outcomes for students (Nordahl, Mausethagen and Kostøl 2009).

It is also known that the behaviour we give attention to tends to be repeated. If we manage to keep a positive focus, and give students encouragement and praise for desired behaviour and restrict attention to the negative behaviour we will help students both academically and socially. In that way praise works as a reinforcer (Good and Brophy 2000, Webster-Stratton 2005, Arnesen et al 2006).

Praise and recognition also play an important role building sound relationships. By seeing and recognising the students and by giving them positive feedback the teacher will through patient and systematic effort over time manage to build trust and rapport with their students. Getting positive feedback and praise from a teacher will strengthen students' relationships with the teacher. But there is also a clear correlation between the quality of the relationship and how the student perceives the praise. If the student likes the teacher this increases the effect of the praise and adds to its significance. (Good and Brophy 2000, Lyng 2007).

Do we overdo it?

There is an attitude amongst some teachers, scholars and parents that children get more than enough praise and recognition, and that they are given more positive attention than ever.

Some critics say we have gone too far so that both parents and teachers have been misled into giving praise and attention in an excessive and inappropriate way. Is this really the case? Are we giving children too much praise and recognition in our nurseries, schools and homes?

Despite the fact that praise and recognition are widely accepted in our culture as powerful instruments to create growth and development it is still the case that students in school more often experience negative than positive feedback from teachers on their efforts and behaviour in the classroom. (Martens and Meller 1990). The literature (Webster-Stratton 2005), indicates that teachers give three to fifteen times more negative feedback than positive feedback. The students with the most negative behaviour get most of the negative responses. We are talking about both verbal and non-verbal communication such as gestures, facial expression, tone of voice, pitch and body language. Most of our communication is non-verbal (Hargie 2006). Therefore, there is a long way to go before we are close to giving praise and recognition the role it should have in the classroom. The general rule is that we should provide five positive statements for each time the child is corrected or criticised (Webster-Stratton 2005) .

Many teachers are surprised to learn how little praise they actually give. In a survey done in Bergen, Norway, (Tømmerbakke 2007) teachers and students were asked about the amount of praise given students in the classroom in response to following the school rules. The results shows that there is little correlation between what the students say that teachers provide of praise and positive feedback in the classroom, and the amount the teachers themselves express that they give. Half of the teachers said they "completely agreed" with the statement that they smiled, praised or rewarded students when they followed school rules, while half of the students said they only "somewhat agree".

That said, there are many indications that the inadequate and ineffective use of praise and recognition will weaken its significance because the results fail to appear. It can even do more harm than good. This essay will go deeper into the positive and negative aspects of praise and recognition later, but first it is necessary to have a conceptual clarification.

Differences and similarities between the concepts

In some of the literature there is a sharp distinction between the concepts of praise, recognition and encouragement. The concept that is most criticised is praise. Praise is criticised (Ginott 1965, Kohn 1993, Juul 1995) for either having a limited impact or a

negative impact. Juul points to the limited impact it has in relation to the concept of recognition. According to Juul praise builds self-confidence and recognition builds self-esteem. Self-confidence is about what we can and how we are performing, whilst self-esteem is more about who we are, and how we feel and see ourselves. Both are important for our human development but self-esteem is of more existential importance. Those who are most critical of praise view it as judgmental and evaluative. According to these critics praise describes the child's effort and behaviour in a competitive and comparative language (the best, finest, highest, etc.). According to them, praise makes the children become self-absorbed and dependant on praise (Ginott 1965, Kohn 1993).

Most of the literature has, however, a far more positive view of the credit and merit of praise (Webster-Stratton 2005, Nordahl et al 2005, Good and Brophy 2000). In much of this literature the terms and concepts are used somewhat interchangeably. In addition to the three concepts, the term valuation is also drawn into the picture (Nordahl, et al 2005, Lynge 2007). All children have something they can be valued for. That also includes those that challenge us the most. Through valuing a student, the teacher expresses what he or she appreciates with the student.

There have been some attempts to separate the concepts somewhat from each other. This applies especially to the difference between praise and encouragement and praise and recognition. It is pointed out that praise is directed more toward personality and character traits whilst encouragement is aimed more towards specific actions (Wormnes and Manger 2005). Recognition is given the most comprehensive meaning. This is primarily from a relational reasoning. To recognise a child means to see, understand, tolerate and confirm them (Bae 1992). Recognition is more related to confirming the students' own experiences. More profoundly, it is about recognising the student whether you praise their positive actions or correct, and rebuke the negative. It means to be able to distinguish between what a child does and what a child is.

In viewing praise, the most congruent aspect in the literature is the importance of distinguishing between effective and non effective application and understanding of the concept (Arnesen et al 2006, Nordahl et al 2005, Webster-Stratton 2005, Good and Brophy 2000). In this literature, it is emphasised that when praise is used to promote competition and comparison between students, or used by teachers to judge and manipulate the students the

use is unfortunate and inefficient. The descriptions of effective praise, however, have many features in common with the descriptions of recognition and encouragement.

Although there are differences between the concepts of praise, encouragement and recognition I will in my further presentation choose to use the term praise. Both from the literature, from personal experience and practical interest, I use praise in the sense of effective praise and find that in many ways it overlaps with the concepts of encouragement and recognition.

I do however want to emphasise that recognition has a more significant and important impact on children's and adolescents' development and growth. Recognition means accepting people as they are with their paradoxes and contradictions (Bae 1992). No matter what the child or youth does or accomplishes we must be able to affirm and appreciate them as a human being. We can condemn their actions, but we must not ascribe them with qualities and characteristics that devalue and offend them as human beings. It is when we unreservedly recognize and confirm the child's strengths and weaknesses and show them that we care about them that we make the most important basis for their learning and development.

What are the benefits of using praise and what prevents us from doing it?

In conferences ,lectures and workshops with thousands of teachers through a period of ten years, I have asked teachers and teaching assistants what benefits they see for their students and the learning environment when they use praise. At the same time, I have asked them to reflect on what prevents them from using praise. In Table 1 and Table 2 below, I give a presentation of some of the key factors that are most frequently reported (without priority):

Table 1. Benefits of the use of praise

"It is motivating for students"
"Strengthens students' self-confidence"
"It increases students' self-esteem"
"It helps both me and the students to focus on the positive"
"The desired behaviour is repeated and reinforced through when we recognise and praise it"
"It creates well-being and joy among students and between teachers and students"
"It spreads like rings in the water - praise is contagious - the teacher is a model"

"It's relationship-building"
"I makes my day easier and more enjoyable"
"It created a culture of praise in the entire school"
"It helps to make a good working climate in class and students are more focused"
"The pupils' coping ability is improved"
"Pupils are more confident and trusting"
"It makes it easier for me to see the students positive aspects"

The benefits can be summarised into the three primary advantages of using praise as stated in the introduction: motivation, reinforcement of desired behaviour and relationship building. We can, however, add another key relationship. It is the contribution praise makes to *create a good atmosphere and a positive learning environment*. Teachers often express the view that praise and recognition bring joy and that the joy is equally divided between those who receive praise and give praise. That praise helps create a good social climate and a positive atmosphere in the classroom is emphasised by several researchers (Henderlong and Lepper 2002).

Despite the fact that praise has obvious advantages; there is no reason to exaggerate its importance. Many point out that praise can help to increase students' self-esteem and that this again will be able to promote scholastic achievement and coping ability. But when it comes to the relationship between the promotion of self-esteem and school achievement the research is more critical and reserved. It is instead pointed out that good school performance contributes to increased self-esteem. However the same research shows that there is a correlation between high self-esteem and a sense of happiness and satisfaction (Baumaster, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs 2003).

I will elaborate on the benefits of the use of praise later when exploring how praise can be effective. First, I will present a discussion on the most important prevention factors. Although it is easy to get teachers to point to the obvious and key benefits of praising their students, it is not unusual, as the table below also shows, that the obstacle factors are just as numerous and significant. This helps to explain why, despite many strong arguments to use

praise, it is still difficult to implement in practise. It is unfortunately still the case that it is far easier to give students negative rather than positive feedback.

Table 2. What prevents you from using praise?

"It is perceived as a bit unnatural and artificial"
"Some children are difficult to praise because they show so negative and problematic behaviours"
"We have a tiring and stressful work situation"
"It's unusual, I have little experience"
"It is culturally conditioned - a lack of praise culture"
"We have so much more to keep focus on - a strong focus on academic achievement"
"We don't have enough time"
"Afraid that it will be perceived unfair - that the praise is not distributed fairly"
"Pupils will depend on praise"
"The praise is governing and judicial"
"Praise helps the students who are guided by external verification and motivation"
"Some children are negative to praise or reject it"
"The praise is experienced as a ritual and superficial"
"I am indisposed- have a bad day – lack of energy"
"We take the students' behaviour and achievements for granted and do not think it is necessary to praise them"
"We don't have to praise normal age relevant behaviour"

The main obstacles

The main factors contributing to why teachers are reluctant or find it hard to praise can be grouped into four areas: 1) the cultural and contextual factors, 2) those that point to the risk that children will be externally motivated and dependant on praise, 3) those that relate to the school setting factors and 4) individual teachers' qualifications and individual differences.

Cultural and contextual factors

In regards to praise the cultural conditions in a country like Norway can vary from region to region and there are differences between cities and the countryside. In addition, there is an obvious generation difference. It is not uncommon, especially amongst older teachers to meet the following statement: "I myself was never praised as a child." Or "I remember very well the time I got praise from my teacher." For many of these teachers with so little personal experience it is not easy to be a model when it comes to praising others. They have few internal images and experiences to draw from. But the cultural factors are of course not only of individual character but are often implicit in the system. At some schools, there is little tradition to use praise. It is much harder to be the good praise model in a class if you work in a school where the leadership and your colleagues do not see and recognise you or give you positive feedback on the work you do.

Regardless of age and location there are many who point out that much of the praise given is performed in an unnatural manner, or in an artificial or unfamiliar way. These teachers have expressed that they think praise is often external and ritual. This is confirmed in school research. Much of the praise that is granted is not very specific; it is very general and superficial. This is more typical in primary schools than in secondary schools (Klette 2003).

Some children are difficult to praise

Teachers also point out that it is difficult to praise some children. They either feel that there is little to praise, or that the negative behaviour takes so much focus. Evidence indicates that the teacher's relationship to the pupil has a significant influence when the praise is perceived as meaningful and real for the student. A survey by Brophy and Evertson (Good and Brophy 2000) showed that teachers who liked the student praised in a way that was experienced by the pupil as credible and spontaneous. The praise was carried out with a smile and focus on specific academic achievement. Students who were disliked by the teacher were praised almost as often, but the praise was given without warmth, and most often related to behaviour and not academic activity.

Other children are difficult to praise because they do not like being praised or reject the praise. There are various reasons why some children react in this way. Some children are very shy and do not like the attention that the public praise gives, while other children have such a bad relationship with the adults that give the praise (and perhaps also to most adults) that they do not believe in it. Other children may dislike to be praised because it affects their

role and status of the class in a negative way. They are for instance afraid of being accused of being the teacher's pet. Some children may also perceive the praise as an expectation that they are afraid they won't be able to meet.

Students who are inattentive and struggle with low concentration often find it difficult to absorb praise. It must in those cases be given with a "megaphone effect", in the sense that it has to be overstated in order to be perceived.

The relationship between internal and external motivation

One of the factors that most often is pointed at to justify what prevents teachers from using praise is the fear that by giving praise too often to students they will become dependent of praise. They are afraid that students will get used to being externally controlled and that pupils' learning and behaviour are not inner-motivated. Students do what the teacher gives attention and praise to sweeten and satisfy the teacher and not to follow their own curiosity and desire to learn.

Many people have a clear idea that there is a close and simple relationship between the use of praise and the development of inner motivation. Henderlong and Lepper (2002) made a thorough review of the research literature in this area and point out that there are both factors connected to using praise that promote intrinsic motivation and factors that undermine it. Their review coincides on several areas with the points I will present later in this article about what contributes to making the praise efficient and what counteracts it. In general, it is pointed out that both the scope and importance of praise is more powerful for smaller children. It is therefore important that the praise is adapted to children's different age and developmental level. The importance of intrinsic motivation and the strength of your own self-esteem will increase with the years. It is for that reason easier for a 12 to 13 year old to motivate himself than it is for a 6-7 year old, but there is no basis for claiming that praise is in contradiction to the promotion of intrinsic motivation, regardless of age. When parents and teachers praise their children with empathy and credibility, when praise is specific and targeted it will be able to contribute to the learning of new knowledge. The skills will be internalised and at the same time the child's self-esteem increases (Webster-Statton 2005).

The school's framework factors and teachers assumptions

One mitigating factor that is very common to highlight in relation to teachers' use of praise in the classroom is the school's limited resources. This is usually concretised to factors like the

time pressure, a hectic schedule, too large classes, the strong emphasis on academics and too much else that takes focus and effort. There is little evidence in the literature that supports these factors as relevant. An evaluation study, produced by a research team led by Kirsti Klette, University of Oslo, looks at the physical and organisational framework for classroom activities (Klette 2003). What she and her colleagues have found, in brief, is that the changes in the physical organisation differ significantly between lower grade schools and secondary schools. For the youngest pupils, there is great degree of flexibility both in time spent, the exploitation of the area, and the use of different activity zones. In secondary schools the activity is more static with 45-minute lessons. All the students are gathered in one big class and the students sit in rows of pairs. When the researchers compared the relational framework and interaction between teacher and pupil and the use of praise and appreciation it does not appear that the difference in physical framework and organising affects the social climate substantially. A lot of positive teacher student interaction at all levels of school was observed, but explicit praise and recognition and use of collective praise is more prevalent among the youngest students than among the oldest. The praise at the secondary level was more specific and individually tailored.

That said, it is not difficult to understand that different local conditions and differences in the various educational settings will affect teachers' opportunities to be good classroom leaders. Consequently, this affects how they use praise and recognition in a constructive and effective manner. This is an issue that not only rests on the individual teacher's subjective determination. A review of the important key factors for effective schools shows that the relationships on both system and individual level must be present in a school to pursue excellence in teaching and classroom management. These factors include the school leader's role, the use of consistency in use of rules, frequent communication between teachers and students individually and collectively, as well as the involvement of parents and a positive climate (Ringsmose 2003).

I have chosen so far in this review to devote most attention to the factors that prevent the use of praise, because they have received little attention in previous literature. Praise and recognition has great public support in most academic communities and among the general public, but nevertheless, the use of praise is far less eminent than we could expect. To be aware of these obstacles and take measures to minimise their impact will be necessary to change this picture. Achieving increased focus on the use of effective praise in school is no

easy task to accomplish and will involve systematic effort and commitment from all levels in the school environment.

Effective and ineffective use of praise

There seems to be broad agreement that praise acts as a reinforcer of the desired behaviour, helps to strengthen the internal motivation, builds good relationships and creates increased well-being and satisfaction. It is therefore necessary to take measures to increase the use of praise and at the same time ensure that praise is given with quality and that there is high awareness of how praise is used. (Lyng 2007, Good and Brophy 2000). This is only possible if the use of praise follows certain specific principles and guidelines with the intention of making praise efficient (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). Table 3 is based on some of the literature in the field (Good and Brophy 2000, Henderlong and Lepper 2002, Nordahl et al 2005 and Webster-Stratton 2005) and represents the most important factors that contribute to making praise effective and those factors which make praise ineffective.

Table 3. Effective and ineffective praise

Effective praise	Ineffective praise
It is targeted and systematic	It is given randomly and unsystematic
It is concrete and specific	It is general and unspecific
It is given with warmth and enthusiasm	It is given without engagement and empathy
It must be sincere and honestly intended	It is not genuine or truthful
It does not focus one-sided on results, but also on the process and efforts	It is one-track minded on achievement and results
It should not be combined with criticism	It's combined with criticism
It gives the student specific information on what they can, what they do and what they have achieved	It lacks the relevant information and is of little value
It helps the student to become aware and recognise their own task-related behaviour	It is concerned with comparing students and promoting competition
It is based on realistic expectations	It expresses either too low or too high expectations

It attributes the achievement to ability and effort and creates the expectation that success will be repeated	It attributes the achievement to either ability alone or to external factors such as luck or ease of task
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Ten principles for effective use of praise

Based on the above table, I will summarise effective praise in 10 principles. These are principles that are necessary to maximise the use of praise and to tailor the use to students with different needs and abilities.

1. Praise must be specific, targeted and adapted to the individual

Most praise should be given individually and adapted to the individual student. There are some students who do not perceive general and collective praise and it therefore has little effect on them.

2 Those who get least praise need it the most

Children with low self-esteem and low self-confidence who often show an introvert behaviour, and children who show a lot of negative behaviour often get little praise, but they need more praise and positive attention than other children.

3 Use of group praise promotes a sense of belonging

Praise to the whole class or groups of students will help strengthen students' sense of belonging in the class and group. Praising a student group that works well collectively also contributes to creating a positive community identity.

4 Praise must be real and given with warmth and enthusiasm

Teachers and other grown ups can use praise in a manipulative and false manner. The older the children are the easier they expose and denounce such a practice. If praise seems fake the students not only reject the praise, it will also undermine the confidence in the person who gives the praise.

Similarly, praise loses much of its effect if it is performed in general terms and by using superficial words and expressions. Enthusiasm and warmth should not be confused with the excessive use of big words and superlatives like "fantastic" "top" and "awesome".

5. Give praise to the process and not only the result

In our Western culture, and also in our school culture, we have a tradition of having a strong and partly one-sided focus on performance and the finished product. Much of the credit students receive is subject to when they have reached the goal of a task, when the job is done, when two lines are placed below the correct answer or when the product is completed. Such a practice means that students with concentration problems and low academic self-confidence are less frequently given praise and recognition for their efforts. They are underway in a learning endeavour and therefore must be commended for trying and not only for the result.

6. Keep praise clean

Often praise is linked with criticism. For some students, especially the youngest and the ones with least faith in themselves, only the negative feedback will be remembered. For this reason it is important to keep the praise clean. If praise is mixed with reprimands, the student will easily become confused and have difficulty absorbing the positive.

7. Praise must be given an informative content, and express clear and realistic expectations

For praise to have a maximum effect and also help to strengthen the internal motivation, it is important that it communicates clearly to the pupils what they can and what they have achieved. For this reason, it has a greater effect to praise a student's abilities rather than their efforts. Praise of abilities is more expressive for pupil competence. It works, especially for the slightly older students, better to hear a teacher say, "You are really skilled in calculating with fractions" rather than "Now you've really made great effort in this mathematics lesson".

8. Give praise immediately

The fact that praise is given immediately after the action in time is of course particularly important the younger the child is, but it is also of great importance in relation to pupils who lack confidence and who are inattentive and restless. It is therefore important that the teacher is present in the situation, and observes continuously. A teacher who is constantly in motion and moves the eyes in the classroom can easily "catch students when they do something good". For younger students and those who need praise the most, it is advantageous if the praise comes within five to ten seconds after the actual action.

9 Help the child to praise herself

Teaching children to praise themselves is challenging for many teachers as it coincides with some of the factors that make us think it is difficult to praise. The best way to help children

praise themselves is to be a good model and praise yourself as a teacher. The importance of teaching students to praise themselves is related to the fact that many children have difficulty putting words on and recognising their own progress and achievement. It is important that students know when they have done something worthy of positive attention and recognition and can give themselves a pat on the shoulder.

10 Train to praise each other

Both adults and children need help to get better, both to give and receive praise. Therefore, praising oneself and each other should be practiced both individually and in groups both among students and adults. It is a good thing to set time aside to train for this. It can be done with a simple compliment circle where students or staff sit in a ring and say something positive to the person sitting next to them in the circle.

In this article, I have argued against those who believe it is inappropriate to praise children and young people in fear of making children dependent on praise and self-absorbed. I have presented broad evidence to support the benefits of using praise. However, I have also taken into account that we often give praise in an inaccurate and inappropriate manner. I have referred to research that points out that children and young people's motivation and coping increase when praise is used in an effective and good way. If praise, however, is ineffective and inappropriate the benefits are sharply reduced, and at worst counterproductive. Increased awareness and more effective use of praise will help to ensure that more children and young people experience a stable and meaningful learning environment and increase their personal growth.

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