

Student Behaviors and Teacher Use of Approval versus Disapproval

Dan Laitsch

The Question

How do the ways in which teachers express approval and disapproval of student actions bring about change in individual and group behaviors?

The Context

Relationships play a key role in classroom management and discipline. The way in which teachers interact with individual students—as well as with groups of students and the entire class—helps define acceptable (and unacceptable) academic and social behaviors, as well as desired learning outcomes. When reacting verbally to students, teachers may use a variety of management techniques, including praising desired behaviors, expressing disapproval of undesirable behaviors, or even ignoring student behaviors. Although historically many teachers have worked to control student outcomes by expressing disapproval for unacceptable actions, recent research has focused on the benefits of praising good behavior rather than focusing on unacceptable behavior. Expression of disapproval may have a short-term effect on student behaviors, but praise appears to have a longer-term effect and to be more generally effective at influencing student actions. As a result, teachers have been encouraged to use praise for desired behaviors in an effort to set a positive tone for learning in the classroom. Although researchers looking at classroom interactions suggest that teachers have increased their use of praise, their findings also indicate that much of that praise focuses on the academic behaviors of students rather than their social behaviors. By focusing praise or approval on acceptable academic *and* social behaviors, teachers may be able to more effectively manage their classrooms.

The Details

Jeremy Swinson and Alex Harrop conducted the study highlighted in this issue of *ResearchBrief* (see [below](#) for full citation). The researchers designed a short-term program to help teachers examine their own use of praise and disapproval in the classroom and supplemented this information with a brief training presentation on managing student behavior. Prior to the training session, teachers were observed in their classrooms, and researchers collected data relative to the manner in which teachers verbally engaged their students, as well as student behaviors. The training presentation included a discussion of the findings from the initial observation in conjunction with a brief overview of four strategies for teachers to use when managing student engagement:

Make academic and behavioral expectations clear.

Recognize individual students when they exhibit desired behaviors.

Acknowledge students (and groups) when they are working appropriately.

Adjust the frequency of feedback as appropriate (for example, provide more feedback at the start of an activity).

Nineteen teachers from schools in northwestern England participated in the study: six teachers from the preprimary grades, six at the primary level, and seven in secondary schools. The secondary-level teachers all worked in the same comprehensive school, whereas the other teachers were spread across five primary schools. The results of the initial observation were discussed in the aggregate, and general findings showed that teachers tended to focus on individual, rather than group, behaviors and that their feedback tended to be more reactive than proactive. Teachers used approval or praise primarily for academic work, whereas disapproval was targeted at student behaviors.

As part of the training program, teachers were advised by the researchers to avoid drawing attention to off-task behavior and instead focus on praising appropriately behaving students located near the off-

task student(s). Researchers encouraged nonverbal engagement with off-task students (e.g., eye contact) and repeating directions to the student, as well as other redirection strategies. Despite the directive to focus on desired behaviors, teachers were not expected to ignore off-task behaviors and were directed to use appropriate school-based interventions for more serious disruptions (i.e., behaviors that brought the lesson to a halt). The goals of the training included increasing the rate at which teachers expressed approval based on required or desired behaviors while decreasing their use of disapproval.

Researchers hoped these changes would result in greater on-task behaviors from students. Researchers also hoped the training would result in teachers increasing their use of approval for social behaviors, focusing on groups as well as individuals, being more descriptive when offering praise (e.g., specifically stating what the student was being praised for), using student names during the dialogue, and using redirection more frequently. After the 2.5-hour training session ended, researchers conducted a follow-up observation to see if teacher behaviors had changed and whether these changes were accompanied by changes in student behavior.

In general, teachers increased their use of approval across all three levels—from an average of 1.09 occurrences per minute to 1.91, while also cutting their use of disapproval (from 1.00 to 0.39). The increase in teacher use of approval was statistically significant for both academic work (64 percent increase) and social behaviors (200 percent increase). At the same time, observed student on-task behaviors rose from 77.5 percent to 94.1 percent. Teachers were also 50 percent more likely to redirect off-task students after the training than they were prior to the training.

The Bottom Line

Changes in the way teachers interact with students—increasing their use of approval and praise for appropriate student behaviors while decreasing their reliance on disapproval—may have a positive effect on students' on-task behaviors.

Who's Affected?

This research focused on teacher behaviors and the effect of positive

teacher feedback on student outcomes.

Caveats

A number of important caveats must be considered when looking at this research. First, the data set for the study was quite small (19 teachers), and no description or examination of participant background traits (e.g., education, previous training, certification status) was given. Second, when looking at the results of the follow-up observation, it is important to consider the possible effect of the observers' presence on teacher behaviors, particularly because the teachers knew what behaviors the observers were looking for. In other words, it would be interesting to see if the desired teacher behaviors were apparent when the observers were not present. Third, the training was extremely brief, and only one follow-up observation was conducted, so the long-term effect of the training on teacher behaviors or the use of approval on student behaviors cannot be determined. Fourth, although the researchers worked hard to ensure agreement among the observers regarding the definitions of praise versus disapproval and on- versus off-task student behavior, little description was given of the lessons observed or the student work, nor was the manner in which students were judged to be on or off task described. Fifth, classroom management techniques are affected by a wide variety of variables beyond teacher-student interactions; consequently, the results from the current study may not generalize to other educational settings.

The Study

Swinson, J., & Harrop, A. (2005). An examination of the effects of a short course aimed at enabling teachers in infant, junior, and secondary schools to alter the verbal feedback given to their pupils. *Educational Studies*, 31(2), 115–129.

Other Resources

[Teachers' Use of Approval and Disapproval in the Classroom](#)
[PDF file]. *Educational Psychology*

[Classroom Management That Works: Research-Based](#)

[Strategies for Every Teacher](#). ASCD Book

[The Definition of Classroom Management](#). ASCD

[Getting the Teacher's Attention](#). ASCD *ResearchBrief*

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Dan Laitsch serves as ASCD's consultant editor for *ResearchBrief*. Laitsch is an assistant professor in the faculty of education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, and is coeditor of the *International Journal for Education Policy and Leadership*.

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