

AN ARGUMENT FOR DELAYED, INDIRECT, EMBEDDED PRAISE

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ABSTRACT

This case study investigated preservice teachers' perceptions of their use of "backdoor praise" (BDP)—praise that is simultaneously delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments—during their final internship. Three participants representing elementary, middle, and high schools, were observed to collect baseline data on their natural use of BDP. The researcher then explained BDP and conducted two more observations of each preservice teacher and their use of BDP. Twenty-eight incidents involving 21 students were recorded; 16 students maintained long-term on-task behavior ranging from three minutes to nearly 60 minutes post-BDP. The preservice teachers were interviewed after each observation, and they all reported positive student and whole-class reactions to BDP; in addition, the student teachers reported that their use of positive comments increased while their use of negative comments and reprimands decreased. These results suggest that direct instruction in BDP helped the preservice teachers to become more aware of their own praise talk.

Introduction

General and specific praise have been found to be effective in the classroom to engage or re-engage students (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo, 2009; Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004; Marchant & Anderson, 2012; Sigler & Aamidor, 2005) and to reduce misbehavior (Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011; Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010). Studies document the ways students benefit and respond positively to direct oral praise (Boyd, Keilbaugh, & Axelrod, 1981; Conroy et al., 2009) and immediate praise (Conroy et al., 2009; Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011). Sometimes teachers' praise is generic (e.g., "Very good!") or behavior-specific (e.g., "Stephanie, you did great showing how you solved the problem," or "Thank you, Martin, for waiting quietly for the bell."). Praise for academic work boosts students' self-esteem (Burnett & Mandel, 2010), provides feedback on progress, and encourages learners to continue working hard (Marchant & Anderson, 2012). Praise for on task behavior can be used as a classroom management strategy to reinforce classroom expectations and rules (Billingsley, 2016; Dobrinski, 2004; Partin et al., 2010).

The impetus for this study was based on the researcher's observation of nearly 400 preservice teachers over a span of three decades. Her clinical observations included ways that K-12 students reacted positively to praise that was delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments; this indirect praise appeared to be an effective tool for encouraging students. The researcher subsequently labeled this type of positive feedback as **backdoor praise**, or **BDP**.

Backdoor praise is praise given by the teacher to a student or group of students after a span of time, from within a few minutes to as long as a day later, in which teachers include reference to students' previous work, response, behavior, or participation. The subtle means in which BDP is given, embedded in teacher comments (e.g., "I'm going to include zeros as place

holders in these next problems the way Marcus did earlier.”), can be effective with students who are uncomfortable with public praise.

Brief Review of the Literature

Brophy (1979) and Flanders (1961) studied the positive effects of praise embedded in discussions, a method that closely matches the elements of BDP. Most studies focused on the positive effects of immediate, behavior-specific praise (BSP) and contingent praise (Conroy et al., 2009; Duchaine, Jolivette, & Fredrick, 2011; Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011). Danielson (2010) noted the negative effects of delayed praise related to written feedback on assignments and tests. Boyd et al. (1981) went so far to say that indirect praise was undesirable compared to direct praise (Boyd et al., 1981).

An extensive search of the literature found just two studies specifically focused on delayed praise of students. Trolinder, Choi, and Proctor (2004) and Dobrinski (2004) both noted the positive effects of praise delivered to individual students the day after on task behavior. Dobrinski’s qualitative dissertation study expanded his professors’ observational work by increasing the sample size from two to four students. In both studies, specific second-grade students were selected for observation because of their tendency to be off-task during instruction. The results of the qualitative research suggested that delayed praise had a positive effect on the length of time the selected students stayed academically engaged.

Because of the paucity of research on delayed and indirect praise in education, the researcher reviewed literature in organizational settings and found studies that suggested positive correlations between managers’ use of delayed or indirect praise and employee engagement and productivity (Caraher, 2015; Lewis, 2011; White, 2016). Billingsley’s (2016) descriptions of “work refusal, task refusal, and work or task avoidance” (p. 12) apply to disengaged adult

employees and can be used to describe students as well. Two business-related studies reported that employee disengagement at work spanned between 15% (Sims, 2014) and 19% (Bolchover, 2005, as cited in Lewis, 2011) of the workday. Jha and Kumar (2016) found that workplace disengagement could be as high as 40%.

Conversely, in business settings in which employees described themselves as engaged, workers tended to miss fewer days of work (Lewis, 2011); staff turnover was lower (White, 2016); productivity and profit margins were higher (Jha & Kumar, 2016; Sims, 2014; Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2008); and customers reported greater satisfaction with the services they received from the employees (Jha & Kumar, 2016; Mertel & Brill, 2015). In addition, engaged employees reported their feeling valued for their contributions and that they were an integral part of the company dynamic (Caraher, 2015; Dent & Holton, 2009; Jha & Kumar, 2016).

In *Millennials and Management*, Caraher (2015) described employee engagement as a positive spiral. As managers recognize and implement employees' ideas, those employees become more engaged and are more likely to be given and embrace greater responsibilities and opportunities to share additional ideas. The positive cycle continuously builds and strengthens the manager-employee relationship, including collaborative communication, mutual trust, and overall productivity. This positive spiral surely has implications for classroom settings.

Chadha and Kumar (2016) also found that fully engaged employees were more likely to view the workplace as one of collaboration and support, and that feelings of jealousy, intimidation, or disengagement were reduced. Employees were less worried about chastisement or retribution when mistakes were made when they perceived that their company had "virtuous organizational practices" (Lewis, 2011, p. 16) and displayed an "affirmative bias" (p. 17) within

the organization. In collaborative workplaces, negative events were recognized and used as learning experiences (Lewis, 2011).

The researcher kept anecdotal notes of more than 1,500 documented observations of preservice teachers' use of general and specific praise as well as two types of praise that could not readily be classified as general or specific: immediate or delayed. In the case of delayed praise, the researcher coined the label of backdoor praise (BDP). The purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers' perceived usefulness of BDP and their thought processes behind decisions to use BDP versus other forms of praise or classroom management.

Research Questions

The following research questions provided focus for this qualitative study of delayed, indirect, and embedded praise and preservice teachers:

Q1: What experiences and perceptions do preservice teachers have when using BDP as a method for increasing student engagement and decreasing misbehavior?

Q2: In what ways do preservice teachers perceive BDP—delayed, indirect, embedded praise—as having different purposes and effects on students compared to immediate, direct praise?

Q3: Do preservice teachers perceive any negative effects of using BDP?

Data Collection

Three preservice teachers attending a private liberal arts university in the southeastern US volunteered to participate in a case study involving classroom observations and post-observation interviews. The preservice teachers, who all chose pseudonyms for this study, were in their final internships in a suburban school district in the southeastern region of the United States. Kathryn taught in a high school English class; Dawn taught in a middle school math class; and Ruth taught in a fifth-grade classroom in an elementary school. All of the schools shared similar

student demographics. All three preservice volunteers agreed to incorporate BDP in their teaching, were observed three times by the researcher during their internships, and participated in post-observation interviews and a focus study.

After approval by the university's Institutional Review Board, the researcher began the data collection process by conducting three classroom observations of the three volunteer student teachers. The researcher explained the study to the participants' cooperating teachers prior to the start of observations. All three cooperating teachers said they used BDP and recognized its benefits with students, but they had never formally identified this type of praise as a specific strategy for engaging students.

During the observations, the researcher documented the number of times each preservice teacher gave a BDP comment and the immediate observed effect on each student who received the praise. The researcher documented the students' behaviors for the remainder of each observation period, using a plus or minus sign to indicate on task or off task behavior of the target students. For comparison purposes, the researcher also tallied the preservice teachers' use of general and specific praise during observations. Documentation included comments, time stamps of BDP comments, and post-BDP student behavior through the end of the lesson or class period.

Three classroom observations took place over a four-week period. The observations for the two preservice teachers at the secondary level occurred during a full class period (50 minutes). The observations in the elementary classroom varied; the baseline observation lasted 90 minutes, the other two observations were 119 minutes and 26 minutes due to schedule changes at the schools. Because teachers and students can be at different energy levels at

different times of the day, the same time frame was observed for each observation to ensure consistency of teacher and student population related to time of day.

In total, the researcher completed nine BDP observation sheets. Each observation included a hand-drawn seating chart with numbers assigned to each student in each classroom; no student names were used in the documentation in order to maintain privacy.

The researcher also conducted post-observation, semi-structured interviews with each of the preservice teacher participants individually as well as a focus group session with the three participants as a group at the end of the student teaching experience. During the individual interviews and the focus group, the preservice teachers responded to the following questions:

1. To what extent do you feel BDP works as a method of classroom management?
2. How did you decide when to use general or specific praise versus BDP?
3. How did you perceive students' reactions to their receiving BDP?
4. Describe situations or students in which BDP did not work.
5. How long-lasting are the positive effects of BDP?
6. What do you find is the most effective time span between noticing a student's positive comment/behavior and your use of BDP?

The researcher asked additional questions when clarification was needed or the conversation invited them.

Results

Kathryn, the preservice teacher in the high school English classroom, used BDP only three times during the three observations; however, the student recipients stayed on-task throughout the class period. Dawn used BDP 13 times in her sixth-grade (middle school) math class, and Ruth found 12 opportunities to use BDP in her elementary class.

After overall tabulation of BDP use for six observations, the researcher concluded that all 28 events of the use of BDP by the three preservice teachers were associated with the targeted students' active engagement immediately following receipt of the praise. In 22 of the 28 incidents, students remained engaged for five minutes or longer after receiving BDP. Individual classroom results are briefly presented below.

In the high school class, five of the nine students targeted for BDP displayed continued to display off-task behavior after a brief period on task; the other four students stayed on-task for most or all of the post-BDP observation period. In the fifth grade classroom, all the students who received BDP were engaged 75% or more of the time they were observed.

Evidence of positive student response to BDP included one high school student's immediately smiling and holding up a "peace sign" to the class. Upon receiving a second BDP comment, the same student "high-fived" another member of her small group.

Kathryn

In the post-observation interview, Kathryn said that the English student mentioned above has "been greeting me a lot more and [was] more positive overall" (Campbell, 2017, p. 100) compared to a quieter demeanor before receiving BDP. When asked about her perceptions of using BDP, Kathryn said her only concern was that BDP, like any praise, could have negative results if student recipients overreacted, bristled at recognition, or stopped working to avoid attention. However, in the two observations in which BDP was used in Kathryn's classroom, students reacted positively. Kathryn also stated she felt students appeared to like this form of praise and seemed to be more engaged, possibly in the hope they, too, would receive praise for their efforts.

Dawn

During the first observation in Dawn's sixth grade math classroom, the students were working on determining the area of various shapes. Dawn saw a student working on a problem and saw that his answer was correct. As she went over the problem with the class, she embedded a comment about the way the student had worked the problem, and the student's reaction was immediate: he sat up straighter in his chair and worked quickly on the next four problems, trying to be the first to finish. He flapped his paper in the air and said, "That's the answer I got!" and "See?" and "I know the next answer!" The researcher also observed the student's raising his hand for help for a troublesome problem and also his helping the student sitting next to him. Each time the target student was observed, he received more than two BDP comments, and was actively engaged in the lesson.

Another student in the middle school class remained on-task for 20 minutes after receiving a BDP comment. Of the two other students who received three BDP comments total, one was off-task within three minutes. Dawn reported that this student was generally not on-task, out of his seat often, and sometimes left the room without permission. The other student stayed on-task for ten minutes after his first BDP comment and four minutes after his second BDP comment.

In Dawn's second BDP observation, the last student noted above received two BDP comments and remained engaged for the remaining 30 minutes of class. One student smiled when he received a BDP comment and was engaged throughout the class, despite sitting near students who were off-task. A female student was observed on-task at least 12 minutes post-BDP; the second student was partially participating but was considered off-task since she called out often and made a remark about wanting to fight a student in another class. When asked

about this second student's active behavior in the interview, Dawn said, "She's a mover and a shaker!" (Campbell, 2017, p. 106). Dawn shared that the "mover and shaker" who received BDP struggles with math and is often off-task. Dawn worked with this student individually prior to using BDP in hopes that the praise would recognize her efforts, but the student was caught off-guard and was unable to answer correctly, despite having the answer on her paper. However, the student paid attention to the lesson immediately following BDP comments by watching the examples on the screen, and she stayed on-task up to ten minutes post-BDP. Long-term monitoring by the researcher revealed that eight students in Dawn's class remained on-task each time they received BDP comments, while five students were observed being disruptive or off-task at least once after BDP.

Ruth

The long-term positive effects of BDP were the most lasting and observable in Ruth's fifth-grade classroom. In the first observation, a female student, "Amy," smiled when she received a BDP comment nine minutes into the observation, and she stayed engaged throughout the 90-minute class. Ruth explained in the interview that "Amy" struggled to stay on-task, so her on task behavior that day was a big improvement. "I think that BDP led her to have a better day today than she usually does because she [Amy] heard, 'Okay, we can start out the day positive and we can end it positive'" (Campbell, 2017, p. 110). Three other students, two females and one male, also responded positively to the BDP comments they received, and all stayed on-task throughout the class period for as much as 45 minutes post-BDP.

One boy, "Randy," stayed engaged only two minutes post-BDP and was off-task and belligerent within five minutes of receiving BDP. In the interview following the observation, Ruth said that "Randy" sometimes responds to encouragement, but "some days "Randy" could

care less what you say to him, good or bad” (p. 111). Ruth reported that, although she sees most of her students responding positively to BDP, she was not sure BDP would work as effectively on students resembling “Randy.”

Ruth used seven BDP comments for six students during the second observation, including “Amy” (mentioned in the first observation). Three of the students, two females and a male, smiled upon receiving BDP. All but two students remained on-task and engaged throughout the observation period; those two students were briefly off-task nine minutes after receiving BDP comments, when they teased each other, but they were both on-task again 13 and 15 minutes post-BDP. In the interview, Ruth explained that the two students who were briefly off-task ‘like’ each other and that she has to monitor their behavior regularly.

Ruth also shared the positive effect BDP had on a student the previous day. “Nick” was having difficulty staying on-task; upon receiving BDP, “he just lit up, and for the rest of the class, he was on-task” (Campbell, 2017, p. 114). Ruth said that “Nick” is on a behavior plan with a number system ranging from five, being the best, to one. “He got a four that day, which is very good for him. Most of the time he earns twos or threes” (p. 114).

Focus Group Results

An unexpected finding of the study was a natural reduction in the preservice teachers’ use of negative or corrective comments toward off-task students, particularly at the elementary level. The researcher noticed but did not document the number of statements from the preservice teachers that were aimed at redirecting or correcting student behavior. During Ruth’s first BDP observation of her elementary classroom, the researcher realized that this preservice teacher, whose classroom management was excellent, used no negative comments. Every corrective comment was stated from a positive perspective, either through BDP or specific praise. All three

preservice teachers were asked if they realized a difference in their approach to off-task behavior, and they each said that by focusing on students' positive behaviors, they made positive comments more often and were quicker to praise appropriate behavior to get off-task students re-engaged.

Conclusions

The initial data collected from both the interview transcripts and BDP observation forms suggest that BDP exerts a positive influence on students, especially younger students, and serves as an effective classroom management tool for teachers. An additional finding of this study was that these preservice teachers reduced their use of negative comments in response to misbehavior, indicating that BDP may also help improve the overall classroom environment.

All of the participants in this study agreed that BDP would not guarantee its effectiveness with every student in every situation. No single strategy is ever 100% effective. Some students overreact to public attention of any kind; others seem unaffected by any feedback from teachers, whether positive or negative. The participants agreed, however, that BDP is a good strategy to add to a teacher's classroom management "toolbox". The participants all reported the positive results of BDP with their students and in their own approach to student behavior, and all said they plan to use it in their own future classrooms. As Ruth stated in her second interview, "It's just so much better to point out a positive than a negative. Nobody wants to hear how bad they are" (Campbell, 2017, p. 118).

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this case study served to confirm the researcher's documentation of delayed and indirect praise over two decades. Further study of BDP with a greater number of preservice teachers or with experienced teachers would build the evidence of its efficacy and its

inclusion in teacher preparation programs and classroom management coursework. Using BDP requires teachers to be more intentional about how and when to praise students and to predict whether the praise is likely to be effective. While additional research with preservice teachers is warranted, more experienced teachers may be better able to more naturally incorporate BDP into their daily routines.

In addition, broad-scale empirical studies would add to the body of knowledge regarding types of classroom praise. Specifically, researchers could study comparisons of the effectiveness of types of praise based on a number of demographic variables, such as gender, age or grade, subject area, exceptional student learners, educationally adverse students, students who are frequently off task versus those who are not, and more. Experimental studies would make an especially important contribution in an effort to determine causality in relation to student responses to praise and subsequent behavior. One could also study immediate versus delayed praise that focuses on effort versus performance using mindset theory as proposed by Dweck (2012). These recommendations will serve to further the knowledge base related to classroom praise and mindset.

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