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Praise Notes: A Gender Study

Jennifer Berger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

Praise Notes: A Gender Study

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Praise has been found to be an effective promoter of positive school and classroom environments and is used commonly by school adults to promote positive behavior among students. Praise can be given using many different methods; the method studied in this research project was praise notes. As part of a school-wide Positive Behavior Support program, faculty and staff from an elementary school were encouraged to write praise notes to students, identifying targeted positive behaviors. Over a 2-year time period, 2,839 notes were collected, examined for the content of the praise, and further examined according to recipient's gender. This study of praise notes was completed to determine if school adults provided more praise notes or different types of praise to male and female students.

The findings showed that the school adults at the research setting were gender fair in the praise that they gave. They did not praise one gender more than would be expected, given the population; however, males were praised more than females in two areas: responsibility and cleaning. It appears from this population that school adults may have praised students for non-typical gender behaviors in order to promote positive behavior in their classrooms and school.

Keywords: praise notes, Positive Behavior Support, gendered behaviors

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Positive school environments contribute to strong academic and behavioral outcomes (Horner & Sugai, 2000). Teachers report a need for increasing the social skills of students (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). Positive Behavior Support models (PBS) are implemented in school to increase positive feelings and to teach and reinforce positive student behaviors. Behaviors and expectations that are taught using PBS identify specific expectations of teachers and school personnel so that students know the academic and behavior expectations for a positive school environment.

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is an empirically supported intervention based on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) principles. ABA strategies are used to identify strengths and weaknesses in an individual's behavior or in a program. In a PBS model, the organization or school is the target of intervention rather than an individual, which is a common use of ABA. After identification of problems and strengths, a building-based steering committee determines what behaviors to target and how to implement interventions, then makes plans for assessment and a follow up of the program. PBS has the goal to help all students and to serve the entire population. It does this through direction instruction of social skills and other targeted behaviors, such as how to stand in a line, how to walk in the hallways, or how to behave in the lunchroom (Marchant, 2002).

Ideally, within this program structure, student needs are met as the faculty becomes united around a common purpose, a common language is used throughout the school, students experience proactive and direct instruction of behavioral skills, and those skills are positively

reinforced (Marchant, 2002). Sometimes praise notes are used to reinforce the skills that are the focus of the direct instruction.

Strong evidence (Sugai & Horner, 2002) supports that praise creates both positive school and classroom environments, strengthens relationships, and reinforces positive behavior and achievement. In this study the term “praise” is used in reference to an affirming (usually through speech but also through other methods) statement that expresses approval and recognition from the person giving it (Brophy, 1981). Praise works in both academic and behavior situations because when giving praise teachers usually express a positive affect and put the students’ behavior in context of the situation. This gives the behavior value that implies a certain status for the student (Kalis et al., 2007).

Previous research has shown that males and females respond differently to praise. Boys tend to respond more positively to peer feedback than adult feedback, whereas girls typically engage in such teacher-pleasing behavior as conformity and cooperation. Historically, girls tend to have teacher pleasing behaviors and boys tend to have more educational difficulties (Crombie, 1988); these differences may affect the amount of praise given, or not given, to students of a particular gender. These previous findings may affect the way in which females and males receive praise. Additionally, the way that a student reacts to praise may in turn change or manipulate the way that a teacher delivers praise.

For example, it has been suggested that girls perceive themselves as more competent in social skills (Crombie, 1988). If teachers are aware of the way girls behave and perceive their own competence, they may praise them more or less than boys. The effect of the praise on the gendered student may also affect how frequently a teacher gives praise to a student.

Not only have students been known to respond differently to praise based on their gender but teachers respond to gendered behavior (Brophy, 1982). Teachers may not be aware of the fact that they have differential expectations of gendered behaviors and that it may or may not influence which behaviors they praise and whom they praise for those behaviors. This seems an important idea for school adults to be aware of in order to use praise effectively to create a positive school environment, shape behavior, and reinforce positive behavior.

This study will consider how written praise, or praise notes, may be different for male and female elementary school students. Previous research has not considered whether male and female elementary students receive different amounts or types of written praise. These data also give information regarding the types of written praise from teachers.

This research draws attention to the importance of gender in the classroom environment. It looks at a consistently used and substantiated method of reinforcement: praise, which contributes to a safe school environment. The implications for practice in the schools could be a less partial use of praise and a perception of behavior that is less biased towards gender.

Looking at praise in the context of gender will potentially make school adults more aware of their use of praise to shape classroom behavior. As part of continued professional development, school adults can be instructed on not only the proper use of praise but also encouraged to look closely at those to whom they are giving praise and the consequences of that praise.

Research questions for this study will be answered in hopes of creating gender-fair schools and increasing the amount of praise given within the schools. The results will also help school adults see how they are praising students and contemplate their motives for praising students in the ways that they do. The first research question addresses the number of praise

notes written: Do the number of praise notes given by school adults in an elementary school differ by recipient's gender? Praise notes will be tallied to determine the number of praise notes given to each gender to see if it was proportionate to what would be expected according to male and female proportions in the sample.

The second research question focuses on the themes of the written praise notes: What are the most frequent themes for boys and girls in the content of praise notes from school adults? This analysis will consider specific topics that were included in the written praise notes. These topics will include celebration, thanks, positive characteristics, responsibility, quality of work, good classroom behavior, "you are," cleaning, use of name, school awards, and other. The research will look to see which category was praised more often to a particular gender.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this review, I will first present and discuss the research supporting a need for social skills instruction in the schools, then explain the theory and implementation of Positive Behavior Support in the school system. I then review current literature on praise's effectiveness as a reinforcer when implemented in a Positive Behavior Support system. Finally, I review current research on gender equity in schools, and specifically, gendered responses to praise in the school.

Social Skill Instruction in Schools

Teaching social skills and addressing the behavioral needs of students has been discussed frequently among educators. In a teacher survey presented by Langdon and Vesper (2000), teachers were asked, "How serious a problem would you say discipline is in the public schools in your community -- very serious, fairly serious, not too serious, or not at all serious?" (p. 607). Data showed that 49% to 50% of the teachers answering the survey believed that discipline was a very serious or fairly serious problem. Over the course of 14 years, the survey showed little difference in the teachers' opinion over time. The teachers still identified discipline as a serious problem (Langdon and Vesper, 2000). This suggests that a proactive and consistent support system at the school-wide level is needed to change school discipline on a scale large enough to match that of the need assessed in this teacher survey.

The response from teachers in the previously mentioned survey supports a school-wide intervention that addresses discipline needs. Such an intervention would need to affect the general school population in a positive and proactive way to change teachers' opinions about discipline problems. Kelman (2008) suggested that in order for learning to occur, behavioral and

academic supports must be delivered simultaneously. Such behavioral support and teaching specific behaviors can be implemented in a model such as Positive Behavior Support (PBS).

Positive Behavior Support

PBS was originally developed to meet the behavioral needs of the special education population in schools; however, it has been used to meet the needs of all populations that are served in the public schools. It is an intervention model that works toward creating a positive school climate, represented by orderly, well-managed classrooms and non-classroom environments (Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008). PBS is found in many public schools that have prioritized discipline needs as a problem serious enough to institute a proactive approach to school and classroom management (Handler et al., 2007).

In addition to reaching the specialized population, PBS has been used to decrease students' disruptive antisocial behavior in the generalized educational setting. It is a proactive model that emphasizes direct intervention approaches (e.g., teaching expectations, monitoring student performance, and providing specific and immediate feedback) in multiple settings (e.g., classrooms, cafeterias, busses, hallways) throughout an entire school (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Conceptual foundations of Positive Behavior Support. The Positive Behavior Support (PBS) approach has a strong conceptual foundation in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which uses behavioral strategies to shape behavior in a positive way. PBS practices are composed of empirically supported ABA strategies that are age appropriate and can be used for change in individuals as well as systems. The PBS model relies strongly on two ABA processes: the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). In order to identify a school-wide or individual behavior problem, data are collected (including environmental, antecedent, behavior, and consequences that maintain the problem behavior), a

hypothesis is made about the data collected about the problem behavior, and a behavior intervention plan (BIP) is created. The BIP that is created uses information from the FBA and then focuses on strengths of the individual or system to make problem behavior less efficient and positive behavior more advantageous (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Positive Behavior Support is also established upon the same principles used in the public health model of intervention and change. This approach identifies a problem by collecting data that determine the cause and identifies trends in the problem's incidence and prevalence rates. It then defines possible causes of the problem through considering what is maintaining the behavior and what might eliminate it. In a public health model, interventions are created and evaluated for efficiency and generalizability. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) recommends a public health approach. The same systematic systems change that is used to battle epidemics such as influenza or AIDS in the health community is used to decrease the incidence of inappropriate behavior and increase pro-social behavior in the school community.

In supporting the instruction of appropriate behavior in public schools, Walker et al. (1996) emphasized the importance of early, school-based behavioral intervention:

Schools have the relatively unique ability to access the vast majority of at-risk children early in their school careers and also to marshal the resources and expertise necessary to address their problems in a coordinated fashion. In so doing, they can help reduce, eliminate, and/or buffer many of the risk factors that, if left unattended, propel young people along a path leading to a host of unfortunate outcomes, including violence and criminal behavior. (p. 17)

Positive Behavior Support and school problems. The Positive Behavior Support model has drawn national attention because it addresses incidents of school violence, use of drugs and alcohol by youth, and lack of discipline in schools, and pro-social behaviors. Reactions to such trends have been to “toughen up” and to treat youth as adults in the form of punishment and reactive discipline (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Such reactions are seen in schools today in the form of on-site police officers, truancy police, and juvenile courts. Research does not support the use of zero tolerance policies or other strategies which focus on the small population committing serious violent crimes (only 1% of the school population; see National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998). In like fashion, crisis response teams have been created and school personnel are instructed on how to respond to violent acts during in-service trainings. In response to such violent acts, zero tolerance policies have become increasingly popular in the form of suspension, expulsion, and placement in alternative school programs (Bear, Cavalier, & Manning, 2008).

The referenced zero tolerance policies and programs for at-risk students focus primarily on responding to behavioral problems rather than preventing and teaching pro-social skills. Pro-social skills instruction is suggested in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act '97, which references the need for and use of positive behavioral interventions that include functional behavioral assessment processes for students who display or are at risk of developing problem behavior that impedes their success at school (Sugai et al., 2000).

Implementation of Positive Behavior Support

In order to better serve the behavioral and academic needs of the school population, a leveled system of response is inherent in the Positive Behavior Support model. It is a responsive

model dependent upon students' and schools' needs based on the entire population, with specialized services and settings increasing according to need (Walker et al., 1996). The appropriate behavior instruction that is a part of Positive Behavior Support meets the needs of the entire school population and is preventative in nature. It focuses on creating a strong core curriculum and making the behavioral curriculum explicit. This is usually done through relatively straightforward tactics such as posting rules and implementing effective, proactive, consistent behavior management throughout the school (Sugai & Horner, 2002). PBS models focus on proactive planning for behavior and discipline problems, rewarding good behavior and providing consequences for negative behavior in addition to opportunities to practice and learn the appropriate behavior.

With Positive Behavior Support we see a program designed for social skills instruction built upon four basic principles: (a) uniting the faculty, staff, parents and students around a common purpose and specific social skills; (b) using a common language to promote consistency within the school community; (c) using a proactive, direct teaching approach to teach the skills to all students; and (d) strengthening the use of the new skills through positive reinforcement and consequences (Marchant, 2002).

Positive Behavior Support takes the strengths of a school and its students, teachers, and administrators and builds on them. It includes a set of problem-solving strategies and processes that build a school climate around these strengths (Frey et al., 2008). These strengths are viewed in conjunction with a school's weaknesses. This school-wide focus on appropriate behavior is combined with a common language to be used throughout the school in the direct instruction of appropriate behavior to all students. Then teachers and personnel monitor and reward

appropriate behavior while consequences are enforced for problem behaviors (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007).

An effective Positive Behavior Support program collects data to evaluate if the school's goals are being met with the decided-upon instruction, interventions, and consequences. Changes are made as necessary, typically by a strong and supportive administrator who oversees decision making and resources (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007). These data can also be used to show the effectiveness of early interventions and provide rationale for the need for increased support through PBS structures in schools.

In summary, there is a rationale for focusing on appropriate behavioral expectations training in schools, especially within the context of a PBS model, which focuses on teaching positive behaviors rather than punishing mistakes. This model positively teaches pro-social behaviors in the school. The positive element of PBS is crucial in identification, instruction, implementation and establishing the consequences in the school-wide program. One way (Bear, Cavalier, & Manning, 2008) that positive behavior is identified and maintained both in the classroom and throughout the school is through praising specific, positive behaviors as they are learned and demonstrated.

Praise

Praise in scholarly writing has the “same meaning and connotation as it does in everyday language: to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration” (Brophy, 1981, p.5). Praise, as opposed to feedback, has a more specific and intense response from the teacher to the student. It addresses a specific, expected behavior (Flora, 2000) and has more emotion than other terms we frequently associate with praise such as feedback, affirmation, or a correct response. Praise expresses emotions from the teacher to the student, for example, excitement,

enjoyment, and surprise. Through this interaction the teacher actually puts the behavior of the student in context by giving information about the value and worth of the specific behavior (Brophy, 1981).

Through the expression of emotion, praise does more than rate the degree of success with a letter grade, score, or a comment such as *correct* or *right*. Specifically, contingent teacher praise in the school setting is a positive response to a desired consequence for a specified, expected pro-social or academic behavior, which may be a correct answer to a question, helpful social skill, or good attendance (Kalis, Vannest, & Parker, 2007).

Uses of praise in the classroom. Praise is used as a reinforcer for an established behavior and meets the definition of a reinforcer as defined as “a consequent stimulus that increases or maintains the future rate and probability of occurrence of a behavior” (Harrington, 2008, p.139). Praise is a piece of a positive behavior support model within a school as well as the classroom. It is desirable and essential when building positive cultures (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007). Praise is used within the school population because it has been shown to be effective for students of many different ages and both genders (Burnett, 2002; Flora, 2000). Burnett studied gender or group preferences for different types of praise. The study assessed the student’s preference for ability praise (e.g., “Excellent grade on your spelling test”) or effort feedback (e.g., “Great job practicing the recorder”). The researchers found younger students preferred receiving ability feedback. A total of 90 % of all girls in the study had a preference for ability praise or effort feedback, which was more than the boys, who reported at 78%. In this same study, participants were asked their preference on the frequency of effort and ability feedback. As age increased, students’ preferences for effort feedback increased and preference for ability feedback decreased (2002).

Praise has been shown to be an effective intervention for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Kalis et al., 2007). In one study, data were collected in a self-contained, adaptive behavior classroom with five students (four boys and one girl) labeled as emotionally disturbed, one teacher, and one paraprofessional. As the teacher increased her amount of student praise, the students' academic grades increased as well. Although the intent of this research is not specific to students who are emotionally disturbed, it does indicate that praise can change the behavior of children with significant behavioral problems.

Ferguson and Houghton (1992) stated that "by using positive, assertive responses, teachers can reduce the frequency of problem behavior, thus saving time and energy previously spent in responding to classroom disruptions" (p. 2). This statement supports the effectiveness of Canter's behavior intervention program (as cited in Ferguson & Houghton) in increasing on-task behavior. Canter collected data after training teachers about the appropriate use of praise. The data were collected from three teachers in three distinct classrooms; of the 24 children in the sample, all but one student increased their level of on-task behavior. Additionally, all three teachers increased their rate of praise after the training.

Praise as reinforcement. Verbal praise has shown to have a stronger effect on students' compliance than effective commands. Starkweather-Lund (2001) conducted research that confirmed this statement as three students (two second graders and one fourth grader) were videotaped to see if an effective command followed by verbal praise from the teacher increased compliance. Teachers were instructed on appropriate verbal commands (focusing on specifics and not giving too many commands) and they could choose between two types of praise statements: a statement explicitly relating to a behavior and a positive verbal statement. As a result of this study, the author recommended praise as a primary intervention to be used before

direct commands. Improvements in academics and classroom behavior were noticed by these researchers. Students' academic responding behavior increased, and rates of compliance increased, as well. One student increased his baseline rate of compliance from 49% to 66%; another student also showed distinct improvements by increasing compliance rates from 56% to 84%; the final student increased from 44% to 67%.

Not only can praise be used as a reinforcer with many different ages and genders, it can also be given by anyone, including teachers, administrators, parents, and peers. Praise accompanied with attention and recognition is an effective positive reinforcement (Flora, 2000). Barker and Graham (1987) stated that "there may be a cluster of commonly accepted and, we believe, positively motivated teacher practices, such as generous praise, minimal blame, displays of sympathy, and unsolicited help, that can sometimes function as low-ability cues" (p. 65).

Effective delivery of praise. For praise to have the greatest impact, it should have some key components (Reavis, Jenson, Kukic, & Morgan, 1993). Researchers have suggested that praise from teachers should outnumber reprimands with a ratio of at least 4:1 (Bowen, Jenson, & Clark, 2004). Flora (2000) further encouraged that as individuals increase their ratio of approvals to disapprovals to 5:1, the behaviors and affect will be highly likely to improve

When praise is given it needs to be in regards to a specific behavior and should be specific (Bowen et al., 2004). For instance, a teacher would praise a student who is raising his or her hand at the appropriate time with, "Excellent, Jan! You raised your hand at the appropriate time!" Responding with "Great job!" would not tend to increase a specific, targeted behavior. When direct instruction is followed by praise, it should be in relation to a specific skill or pro-social behavior. Praise can change behaviors in both academic and behavior situations. When giving praise teachers usually express a positive affect and put the students' behavior in context

of the situation, which gives the behavior value that implies a certain status for the student (Kalis et al., 2007).

In addition to being frequent and specific, praise should be given immediately following the desired behavior. For example, in a token economy, teachers would give a token of praise immediately after the specific behavior so that the student recognized that the behavior was appropriate. The specific behavior may be academic or behavioral (Starkweather-Lund, 2001). Timely praise and acknowledgement could be giving a grade immediately after an exam or a token of acknowledgement of appropriate behavior directly after the appropriate behavior.

Praise can be part of effective instruction when it follows a correct response and it is freely given. It is an instructional tool as well as a very powerful, but much underutilized reinforcer, especially considering that it requires no resources beyond teacher time and attention. By reinforcing a specific behavior, teachers convey their expectations in ways students understand—responses to those expectations are identified and praised. In addition, when the behavior of one child is praised, teachers and parents often find that other children then imitate the behavior (Bowen et al., 2004). The payoff is quite large for this inexpensive strategy.

Teachers should praise frequently and find something to praise every child at least once per day. Teachers can praise students not only in areas of competence but also in areas of most improvement. Praise is contingent. That means that when school adults praise a student, they should be praising that student for something specific and measurable. Verbal praise, therefore, is recommended regularly, consistently and contingently as a positive reinforcer for increasing desired behaviors and thus reducing disruptive off-task behaviors (Ferguson & Houghton, 1992).

Praise is an important reinforcement method for teachers because it provides encouragement and builds a strong relationship between teachers and students. Brophy (1981)

wrote that praise is frequently not used in a way that maximizes its effect on students. When used effectively it can build strong and secure relationships between students and school adults.

In conclusion, this section has summarized research that has shown the effectiveness of verbal praise with students in a school setting. Teacher praise is effective for a variety of age groups and situations. The timing of praise has even been a focus of the research. However, there is little research conducted about written praise (praise notes) and how male and female students might receive differing amounts and types of praise notes.

Function of praise notes. Praise notes are short, written notes that an adult, usually a teacher, gives to a student to document the good behavior or efforts of a student. Positive school climates, which are the focus of Positive Behavior Support, are supported by positive interactions (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007), and praise notes provide a means for positive interactions between students and adults in the school.

Writing praise on a ticket not only serves as a visual reward for the student but is a tangible way to mark progress for teachers who are learning how to praise and encourages them to praise more often. In addition, these notes serve as a reminder to teachers to look for the positive (especially in those students who characteristically receive less praise because of their behavior problems) and can be collected to evaluate whether the teacher is meeting his or her goal. These goals may be established by an administrator (e.g., each teacher is asked to write five notes a day). Praise notes may also be a way to document student progress.

Written praise has the potential of being an influential part of school-wide Positive Behavior Support. A positive climate is created when teachers are looking for positive behavior in the classroom and administrators and other school personnel are recognizing positive behavior (praise-worthy behavior) in the hallways, classrooms, recess, and lunchroom. Praise notes can

contribute to creating a school that is positively supporting good behavior. Praise notes have the means of reinforcing and shaping new social skills that are taught as part of the PBS model. The reason praise notes hold promise for success in developing appropriate social behavior is that they present a common theme for a school and provide a common language for parents, faculty, and staff to use when communicating with students (Handler et al., 2007).

Role of Gender in the Educational Process

In the three decades since the 1972 passage of Title IX, the federal antidiscrimination in education law that created a mandate for equal access for males and females to educational opportunities, there have been numerous programmatic changes in our nation's schools designed to ensure parity for girls' education and to enhance gender equity in general. As a result of these efforts to open doors, we have witnessed significant growth in girls' participation and achievement in math, science, and sports (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW], 1998). During this time period, educators also realized that educational processes and outcomes may differ for males and females. In fact, now we find an emphasis on boys' issues in the educational process.

The measures of success in our efforts to redress educational inequities have largely been at the level of tracking national trends in enrollments and comparisons of academic achievement derived from grades and national test scores (e.g., NCES, 2000; AAUW, 1998). Yet despite a flurry of research on the state of gender equity in schools and the subsequent calls for widespread implementation of gender equity programs and policies, there are few empirical studies that describe how educational changes have directly affected individual student outcomes related to gender equity (Spencer, Porche, & Tolman, 2003).

In answer to the need for research to evaluate gender equity in the schools and its effect on students' gender ideology, school experience, and self-esteem, Spencer, Porche, and Tolman (2003) studied gender equity among seventh and eighth-grade students. Their research involved surveys that were administered to students and teachers in which they reported that they perceived the classrooms as gender fair or gender equitable. This was seen in "equal gender representation in curricular materials, teacher efforts to call on boys and girls equally, and equal access to resources and extracurricular activities" (p.1800). However, during observations and interviews, it was found that girls felt greater pressure to perform, behave and conform to teacher requests, while boys were seen exercising greater freedom and acceptance. The boys perceived making mistakes as part of the learning process. The researchers concluded that boys and girls are intrinsically different, in such a way that calls for differential treatment (Spencer, Porche, & Tolman, 2003).

Brophy (1982) argued that it is not the gender that teachers are responding to but the gendered behavior. For instance, boys tend to be more externalizing in their behavior, a characteristic that is seen as disruptive and not often warranting redirection and praise by teachers. On the other hand girls are seen as having such character traits as cooperation and conformity (Crombie, 1988).

There are differing opinions as to which gender responds better to teacher praise; therefore, additional research needs to be done in this area. Current research indicates that boys are affected more by peer evaluators (not teachers). Researchers have noted that boys are typically found in large groups of friends, playing away from adults, whereas girls may be affected more by adult evaluators, given that girls tend to have one close friend and play near an adult figure (Crombie, 1988). Interestingly, some researchers reported that boys respond more to

relationships with their teachers, especially if those relationships include awareness of boys' desire for fairness and justice, while girls respond more to curriculum content (Crombie, 1988).

Males and females tend to view their competence with social skills differently. Crombie (1988) suggested that "social skills are possibly more important and of greater intrinsic interest to girls than to boys in that girls consider themselves to be more competent in social skills than do boys" (p.3). How confident boys feel about their social skills, or how much boys care about social skills may be related to teacher praise.

Positive Behavior Support initiatives encourage praise for all students, and praise notes are one way of giving feedback about performance. Praise and praise notes are an effective means of maintaining and establishing positive behavior in the classroom and throughout the school. This form of positive psychology focuses on the good behavior that is happening and has been shown to improve that good behavior (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007). Given the gender differences in the way males and females experience school, it may be helpful to understand whether teachers differentially write praise notes to either males or females or provide different types of praise to either gender. Therefore, as praise notes are given with comments containing specific praise, it is important that teachers be aware of gender and its potential influence on the type and frequency of praise notes. This study hopes to provide awareness in regards to gender and teacher preference while still maintaining the importance of praise for all students.

Conclusion

In schools where teachers and administrators are struggling to address discipline and behavior problems, teaching social skills and using praise notes is a simple and effective way to reinforce good behavior. A positive behavior support system needs to be reinforced through

direct instruction so that both students and school adults know which behaviors are being reinforced. However, how gender may influence praise notes is not readily understood from the extant research literature.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the praise notes that were received beginning in the year 2005 and ending in 2007 at a suburban elementary school in Utah. These notes contain information regarding the social skills that were directly taught and then reinforced by means of written praise. Additionally, these notes provided space for additional comments from school adults, which were more specific than the general categories listed in the boxes. These comments provided insight into what the school adult was praising, specifically achievement or behavior. Of the praise notes received, this research will consider whether males or females received a disproportionate amount of praise. Additionally, this research considered whether different types of praise were given to males and females.

The research questions for this study are twofold: First, do the number of praise notes given by school adults in an elementary school differ across the gender of the student receiving the note? Second, what are the most frequent themes for boys or girls in the content of praise notes from school adults? It is hypothesized that boys will receive more praise because they often have more external behavior (Houghton et al., 1988). In addition, it is predicted that boys will receive more praise for achievement than for behavior.

Chapter 3

Method

Setting

The study was conducted across two school years (2005–2007) at a suburban elementary school in Utah with students from Kindergarten to sixth grade. The school was involved in a Positive Behavior Support program.

Participants

In the 2005–06 school year there were 531 students at the participating elementary school. Of the students enrolled, 75% were Caucasian, 21% Hispanic, and 4% other. Fifty-seven percent of the students were male. A total of 53% of the students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, and the school had a mobility rate of 26%. During the time of this study there were 27 teachers; 93% were credentialed. There were also 14 paraprofessionals, including teachers' aides, lunch or recess supervisors, and others.

During the 2006–07 school year, there were 481 students. Of the students enrolled, 75% were Caucasian, 18% Hispanic, and 7% other. Fifty-four percent of the students were male. There were 51% of students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, and the school had a mobility rate of 25%. There were 25 teachers during the 2006–07 school year, of which 93% were credentialed, with 13 paraprofessionals.

Procedure

Praise notes were used as the positive reinforcement for exhibiting good behavior and using good social skills, which were taught through direct instruction to the students. Parent volunteers, staff, school personnel, and the classroom teachers were encouraged to distribute written praise notes to students when they saw students using the learned social skills. Each

praise note was printed in triplicate, with a copy for the student, classroom teacher, and program staff for a permanent record (Marchant, 2002). Included on the praise notes were boxes for school adults to check the positive behavior the student was demonstrating. Also included was an “other” category for those positive behaviors that were not taught directly. In addition to the check boxes there was space provided at the bottom of the note and school adults were encouraged to add additional comments. In 2007, the PBS model was in its seventh year of implementation in the school. The implemented model was adapted by school and university personnel and a steering committee (consisting of a school-based team) that met monthly to evaluate and make ongoing decisions about PBS.

The two leading targets of this PBS model as implemented in this setting were social skills instruction and praise notes. Three specific social skills which were taught included (a) How to follow instructions, (b) How to accept feedback/consequences, and (c) How to show appreciation. The identified social skills were taught directly to students weekly by school adults and then reinforced through praise notes.

Data Analysis

The amount of praise notes given to boys versus girls was figured in a chi-square goodness of fit equation that determined if the proportion was significantly different than would be expected based on the population. Additionally, the content of the praise notes were analyzed to find common themes in the content of the praise. Information such as gender of the school adult and student and the student’s name was removed from the notes so that the coder was unbiased. Two white female School Psychology graduate students at Brigham Young University coded the data independently. The coders classified the comments into separate categories, and then met after coding about 200 praise notes to determine if the categories established were

appropriate. There were 25 categories established after each coder had coded 100 praise notes. The categories were as follows: name, school pride, good/great job/way to go, on-task in class/hard work, appreciate, proud, MVP/diving Dolphin (a reference to the school mascot), hooray, prepared, responsible, helping/helpful, listen/follow directions, example, polite/respect, reading related, homework related, quiet, smile/happy attitude, neat/best work, friend/nice to others, keep up the good work, you are smart, glad you're in our class, you are (positive statement), cleaning, making progress, finished work, other specific behavior.

After all of the notes were coded the initial 25 categories were combined to form 11 categories. Both raters met together to determine which condensed categories would be appropriate. These categories were classified in regards to the specific nature of the praise and are as follows: celebration, thanks, positive characteristics, responsibility, quality of work, good classroom behavior, "you are," cleaning, use of name, school awards, and other.

The auditor, a Counseling Psychology doctoral student at BYU, checked for inter-rater reliability after the coding was complete to ensure that the two coders (who coded separately from each other) were consistent in the way that they coded the same 100 praise notes. The auditor rated the praise notes using kappa scores. A kappa score of 1 was appropriate. Kappa scores ranged from -.008 to 1.00. The auditor decided that the coding was sufficient with an appropriate amount of high kappa scores (1.00 being a high kappa score).

The coders met together after the auditor reviewed the results of the coding to discuss the categories and their subsequent kappa scores and felt that the praise notes receiving a higher kappa score were those with the exact words from the praise notes in the category heading so both raters could easily categorize them (school pride, diving Dolphin, MVP, and proud). While those receiving lower kappa scores were more vague and required generalizing to a broader

category of praise (you are smart, other specific behavior, reading related, smile/happy attitude, neat/best work, and finished work).

Categories with examples and recipient's gender are listed in Table 1. Once the data were put into 11 separate categories, a chi-square test of independence was used to determine if the types of praise given to a gender were significantly different than expected.

Table 1

Categories of Praise Statements and Number of Recipients by Gender

Category	Examples	Frequency	
		Boys	Girls
Celebration	Hooray, way to go, you're making progress	2,156	623
Thanks	Appreciate, thank you, glad you're in our class	968	1811
Positive	Polite/respectful, smile/happy attitude, friend, nice to others, a good example	2,034	745
Responsible	Helpful, prepared, responsibility	2,010	769
Quality of work	Finished work, neat/best work, homework related, reading related	2,216	563
Good classroom behavior	On task/hard work, listening and following directions, quiet, polite	1,392	1,397
You are	You are smart, you are 'positive statement'	2,463	316
Cleaning	Cleaning desks, helping to clean	2,642	137
Use of name	Specific name (Joe) used in the praise note	2209	570
School awards	Diving Dolphin, Grizzly pride	2704	75
Other		2532	247

Chapter 4

Results

The intent of the research was to answer the questions (a) Do the number of praise notes given by school adults in an elementary school differ across the gender of the student receiving the note? and (b) What are the most frequent themes for boys or girls in the content of praise notes from school adults?

The first two analyses that address the question regarding the differential number of praise notes given to males and females are chi-square goodness of fit analyses. On average, across the two years of implementation, the proportion of boys in the school was .555 and the proportion of girls was .445. If the school adults were being gender neutral in how they praised students, the proportions of (a) students praised and (b) the proportions of praises per student according to gender should approximate .555 for boys and .445 for girls or more specifically, 55.5% of the praised students should be boys. The chi-square goodness of fit tests were not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 632) = 0.435, p = .510$ meaning that there was not significant differences in the students who were selected for praise by school adult according to gender. To clarify, 632 students received praise notes; however, some of these students received multiple praise notes. To consider whether there was proportionate differences in the number of praise notes that males and females received, another chi-square goodness of fit test was completed and the results were not significant $\chi^2(1, N = 2752) = 3.065, p = .08$.

Chi-square tests of independence determined whether there were significant differences in the content of praise according to gender. Considering the 11 categories of praise, there was not evident differences in the content of the praise. However, school adults were more likely to praise boys in 2 of the 11 content areas: “cleaning” and “responsibility.” For cleaning, the chi-

square results were $\chi^2(1, N = 2693) = 9.282, p = .002$; for responsibility the chi-square results were $\chi^2(1, N = 2693) = 8.449, p = .004$. Although the overall chi-square values are significant, the standardized residuals are not very strong (only 1 surpasses the CV of ± 1.96). There is a pattern but it is not very strong.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The results of this research generally show that gender was not a significant influence. In how praise notes were used in the implementation of this PBS model. The first question focused on the amount of praise given to boys and girls, considering if the written praise was proportionate to what would be expected based on the sample of research participants. The research shows that the school adults at the participating school were not praising males or females proportionately more than would be expected according to the non-significant chi-square goodness of fit analysis.

The second purpose of the research was to determine if the content of the praise notes was significantly different for males and females. The categories included in the analysis were celebration, thanks, positive characteristics, responsibility, quality of work, good classroom behavior, “you are,” cleaning, use of name, school awards, and other. This research showed that the content of the praise was not different for males and females except in the areas of cleaning and responsibility. In both of these areas boys received more praise than did the girls.

Summary of Findings

Previous research shows that girls prefer praise more than boys. Burnett (2002) showed 90% of all girls in the study had a preference for praise compared to 78% of all boys who preferred praise. It was hypothesized that this may affect school adults’ praise towards each gender. According to Burnett’s research, girls would respond more positively to praise; therefore school adults might praise girls more. This did not prove to be true with this research

study, which showed school adults demonstrating gender consistency in the type and frequency of written praise notes.

According to Bowen et al., praise should be specific (2004). The praise notes that were collected in this research sample were excellent examples of specificity in praise. School adults were encouraged to add additional comments to the praise notes and many did. Those comments were recorded, and according to a chi-square goodness of fit equation, were gender fair in most areas. The exceptions were the areas of cleanliness and responsibility.

It is hypothesized that school adults may have been using praise to actually change behavior or highlight behavior that was not typical, hoping to use praise to increase these behaviors. According to Ferguson and Houghton (1992), praise is an effective reinforcer often used by school adults to increase positive behavior and decrease the incidence of undesirable behavior. Therefore, it can be speculated that the school adults in this sample population may have been using praise to reinforce uncharacteristic behavior and encourage its use. It is also possible that the school adults were surprised when boys did such things as clean up after themselves or pick something up off of the floor, and it stood out to them enough that they wrote a praise note about it.

However, there also is the possibility that school adults just noticed these behaviors more in male students and praised them. Another possibility may be that the girls in the sample did not as frequently display cleanliness and responsibility and that indeed the boys displayed more of these behaviors and were praised because they were more likely to be clean and responsible. Previous research argued that teachers praise according to gendered behavior (Brophy, 1982). The example given was that boys tend to be more externalizing in their behavior; a characteristic typically seen as being disruptive and not warranting teacher praise. On the other hand, girls are

seen as having such character traits as cooperation and conformity (Crombie, 1988). The school adults in this study did not praise students differentially by gender. However, school adults praised boys for responsibility (a behavior very closely related to cooperation and conformity).

Other authors (e.g., Spencer et al., 2003) demonstrated that girls felt greater pressure to perform, behave, and conform to school adult requests, while boys were seen exercising greater freedom and acceptance supports the argument that school adults were praising students for non-typical gender behaviors possibly to increase the likelihood that those students would engage in that behavior. The school adults may have wanted boys to clean more often and show more responsibility so they praised that behavior. School adults may be encouraging nontraditional gender roles with the assumption that it improved that behavior.

The current research suggests that school adults did not differentially praise male and female students. Teachers and other educators can assume that elementary aged males and females are receiving similar amounts of praise and relatively similar types of praise in settings that are similar to the research site. Praise supports a positive school climate (Frey et al., 2008) and rewards appropriate behavior while consequences are enforced for problem behaviors (Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007). The school personnel in this research study praised generously and they used the correct principles of praise (they were specific, and the praise was given daily, and throughout the whole school). These results indicate that this intervention is being delivered in a consistent manner for female and male elementary school students.

Previous research suggested that praise was often biased according to gender (Brophy, 1982). This research shows that school adults were not differentially praising boys or girls. The school adults used praise consistently between the genders. It is likely that without additional emphasis or attention, elementary teachers are likely to praise students similarly, regardless of

gender. Additionally, the research encourages school adults to continue to praise non-gendered behavior. The fact that the school adults were praising boys for cleanliness and responsibility suggests that some praise may be directed at non-stereotypical gendered behavior.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

A few limitations to this study should be noted. First, the research is limited to elementary school-aged students (ages 4–12) in a suburban, largely fairly middle-class school. The population that this data was collected from is not diverse enough to be generalized to all populations. Second, although the praise note coders had a third member audit the praise notes according to category, there is room for error due to individual interpretation of the praise notes. However, there was a sufficient kappa score from the auditor that indicated there was sufficient inter-rater reliability. Third, school adults were coached at the beginning of the PBS intervention about how to give praise and which behaviors specifically to give praise and they were aware that their notes were duplicated and circulated among colleagues to some extent, although the nature of the studies to be conducted using the praise notes was not explicitly discussed with the teachers. Finally, 59 praise notes were not entered into the data base with sufficient information to be used in the analysis and so were excluded. Fifty-nine is about 2% of the entire sample, so it likely had minimal influence in the overall results.

This research left a few questions to be addressed in future research. First, is it efficacious for school adults to praise students for a teacher-desired behavior? The school adults in this population may have believed they would see a change in behavior if they praised that behavior when they saw it. Further research could show if this belief is valid.

Future research could consider if school adults writing praise notes can facilitate change in behaviors that tend to be atypical for that gender. Research in this area could consider if

praise can facilitate change even for behavior that is not consistent with gender stereotypes. For example, can school adults increase assertiveness in females?

Finally, as the data from this research was evaluated and discussed, the question arose: Does the gender of the school adult affect the gender of the student that is praised and the behavior for which the praise was given? This question could be answered using the same data set to examine the gender of the school adults who gave the praise to see if they were biased in whom they praised and for what behaviors.

Summary

This research considered whether the amount of praise given to boys and girls was proportionate to what would be expected based on the sample of research participants and whether the content of the praise notes was significantly different for males and females. We found that the school adults in this sample population were unbiased in the amount of praise, but there were some differential types of praise for genders: boys were more likely than girls to be praised for cleanliness and responsibility.

These findings appear to be notable because they indicate that school adults praise male and female students consistently and may not need additional direction or training about gender issues in praise, at least in the elementary setting. School adults in this sample population actually praised boys for cleanliness and responsibility, which in terms of gendered behavior are typically non-stereotypical. It is speculated that the school adults were praising in order to create behavior change for a behavior that was not typically engaged in by males. Praise is a known reinforcer and is used frequently in the classroom, and the results of this study are encouraging: school adults are using praise fairly, among both genders, to reinforce good behavior.

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