

Teacher Praise for Student Effort, Achievement, and Ability

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**ABSTRACT**

Research has been conducted by Carole S. Dweck that advises teachers to praise students for their effort in learning. She recommends not base so much emphasis on ability.

Dweck's research indicates that teachers and parents can significantly encourage children's future efforts by praising children for effort rather than intelligence. The purpose of this study was to determine how elementary teachers' judgments of feedback statements are aligned with Dweck's research. The goal of this study was to explore all types of praise and determine the most appropriate use of praise to enhance child effort and confidence in order to allow students to persist in their efforts to master increasingly difficult and new challenges.

The results of this study found that teacher praise for student effort resulted in student's persistence and willingness to take on new challenges than does praise for ability or achievement. Overall, the respondents rate highly statements of effort and ability, which include explanations for praise. Teachers also tended to rate each scenario based on each student's needs as opposed to rating each scenario based on effort, achievement, or ability.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Beliefs about abilities can influence peoples' choices of challenges and levels of willingness to persist in the face of difficulties and past failures. How people think about their abilities and choose future challenges can be influenced by what they hear when they are praised for successful performance. Statements of praise can communicate whether a person thinks that intelligence and abilities are unchangeable. These ideas have been explored extensively by psychologist Carol Dweck. Her research on perceptions of abilities provides a framework of thinking around which this study of teacher opinions on feedback of student performance is based.

Dweck (2000) organizes thinking about abilities into two major perspectives. The entity theory purports that abilities are fixed and unchangeable. A feedback praise statement such as "you must be smart at that" may trigger thinking that reflects the entity theory. The incremental theory contends that abilities can be improved by greater effort and wiser use of available resources. Feedback that explains success or failure on factors of effort or whether one remembered to use the right resources may trigger the incremental theory. Most people have probably thought about their abilities from both perspectives. Difference in feedback statements may influence which theory is invoked in a particular situation. Can some types of praise lead people to avoid taking risks while other praise encourages people to tackle more challenging tasks? In the entity theory, "intelligence is portrayed as an entity that dwells within us and that we can't change" (Dweck, 1999, p. 3). In this way of thinking, challenges are threats to self-esteem and students are more likely to pass up more challenging tasks due to fear of looking less adequate to their peers or adults. According to this theory, students feel smart when they are able to complete low-effort, easy tasks, and perform higher than other students around them.

The incremental theory suggests that “intelligence is not a fixed trait that one simply possesses, but something one can cultivate and grow through learning” (Dweck, 1999, p. 3). Hard work and greater effort can make one smarter. Many students with this view will spend more time learning as they want to gain knowledge. Also, they do not fear looking inadequate by their peers. In fact, they are more likely to sacrifice opportunities to look smart at tasks already mastered in order to gain more knowledge by taking on new challenges. “Even students with an incremental theory and low confidence in their intelligence thrive on challenge, throwing themselves wholeheartedly into difficult tasks and sticking with them” (p. 3).

Everyone wants children to have a basic sense of worth, but self-esteem is not something that can be given to them. Self-esteem or self-worth is something that each individual is primarily responsible for and parents, teachers, and other adults can assist by teaching children how to live their lives so that they will experience themselves in positive ways (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck’s research focuses on telling students the truth. She states that it is okay to tell children they do not have all of the skills, or knowledge, or that they are behind other students because those are not a sign of a shameful deficit (1999). Instead it is a sign that they need to study harder or find different and/or new learning strategies. In other words, teachers and parents can be frank with students about what they lack and what they need to do to gain skills or knowledge.

Dweck reported that “within an entity theory framework what we do with students who learn more slowly than others at a given point in time is to relegate” (1999, p. 129). She believes that teachers relegate or classify students to a lower category of intelligence and then may try to make them feel smart by assigning easier things to learn in order to protect their self-esteem. This way of thinking, according to Dweck, causes them to fall further and further behind.



Dweck's research (1999) provides evidence to support the incremental framework in which we give students an honest choice. If students want to get ahead it is up to them, they have to put in the effort that it takes to be successful. It is the adults' responsibility to help the students learn what it takes to achieve.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' ways of praising students in the classroom. More specifically, to what extent do teachers' choices of feedback statements reflect recent research results?

### *Research Objectives*

1. To determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on the incremental theory.
2. To determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on the entity theory.
3. To determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on achievement.

### *Assumptions of the Study*

There are two assumptions apparent in this research. First, it is assumed that the subjects will be consistent in rating each scenario. Second, the researcher assumes that the participants will answer as accurately as possible when completing the questionnaire.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Achievement.* The belief that success can be acknowledged without further explanations, such as any reference to ability, effort or achievement.

*Entity Theory.* The belief that intelligence or abilities are fixed and unchangeable (Dweck, 1999).

*Incremental Theory.* Beliefs that intelligence or abilities can be improved by greater effort and wiser use of available resources (Dweck, 1999).

#### *Limitations of the Study*

The limitations of this study are that teachers will not perceive the given statements the way the researcher intended and will fill in their own statements.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

Prior research by Dweck (1999) indicates that certain types of feedback encourage persistence and willingness for students to venture into new challenges. Other types of feedback may discourage students from taking risks with new challenges. According to Dweck (1999), praising students in a classroom for their effort is more likely to result in a willingness to tackle greater challenges than praising a student for their intelligence or achievement would. Since parents and teachers can greatly influence the orientation and development of a child's self-esteem, it is imperative to explore the different types of praise that parents and teachers give students.

The review of literature covers two ways of praising students. One area addresses views that advocate praise for effort or the incremental theory. The second area discusses a traditional view that advocates praise for ability or the entity theory.

### *Incremental Theory*

Children should have a basic sense of worth and respect, but they are primarily in control of their own self-esteem. Adults can teach students how to live their lives so that they experience themselves in positive ways (Dweck, 2000). In this framework, adults can tell students the truth. "When they don't have skills or knowledge, or they're behind other students, this is not a sign of a deep, shameful deficit. It's a sign that they need to study harder or find new learning strategies" (p. 129).

When students are focused on their potential to learn and educators give them the message that effort is the key to learning, students may take responsibility for and control over their performance. Students need to know that learning is not something that is given to them

and that their self-worth is not based on a teacher's comments regarding their intelligence. "Both learning and self-esteem are things that students achieve as they tackle new challenges and work to master new material" (Dweck, 1999, p. 116). Students who value learning are more likely to make a commitment to their goals and are not afraid to work hard. They know setbacks may be involved, but they are able to bounce back from failure. "These are lessons that cannot help but serve students well in life, as well as in school" (p. 116).

Claudia Mueller and Carole Dweck (1999) conducted six studies on 400 fifth-grade students to examine the effects of praising children for being intelligent. During this study, some students were praised on their intelligence, some were praised for effort, and others were praised for their achievement, or performance. Each student started with a task that was challenging but easy enough for all of the students to do quite well. After they finished the task, one-third of students were praised for their intelligence and were told "Wow, you got x number correct. That's a really good score. "You must be smart at this" (Dweck, 2000 p. 113). One-third were praised for their effort and were told, "Wow you must have worked really hard." The final third were praised for their performance, with no comment on why they were successful. Each student was then given a choice of two different tasks to work on next. One task was described as "New, important, and difficult." The second task was described as "Something they were sure to do well on." Ninety percent of the students who had been praised for their intelligence chose the easy task that would allow them to keep on "looking smart" towards their peers. Sixty percent of the students who had been praised for their effort moved on to a more challenging task. The students who were praised for their performance without an explanation were evenly divided between staying with the easy task or going to the more challenging new set of tasks. Overall Dweck's findings indicate that when students are praised for their intelligence it is

sending a message that it is more important to look smart, and that it is not worth the risk of making mistakes. On the other hand when students are praised for effort and hard work which leads to achievement, they want to continue on in that process (Dweck, 2000).

After failing the task, children who had been told they were intelligent or “smart” displayed less motivation, worse performance, and less enjoyment than the other groups (Radford, 1998). The children who had been told they were intelligent and then failed at a task believed that intelligence was a fixed trait and they could do nothing about it, while the children who were praised on effort believed that the ability could be improved by working harder. “The findings suggested that praising children for their intelligence makes them look smart and they are less likely to take a risk in fear of making a mistake” (Dweck, 1999, p. 113).

Furthermore, it was found that praising children for their effort and hard work led to persistence and willingness to continue engaging in more difficult activities. The children who were praised for their effort were not concerned with how smart they looked (Dweck, 1999).

According to these results, students who see their performance as a measure of their intelligence feel stigmatized when they perform poorly. In fact, more than 40% of the students who had been praised for their intelligence lied by inflating their score to anonymous peers whom they had never met (Dweck, 1999). Very few students praised for effort exaggerated their performance. This suggests that “when we praise students for their intelligence, failure becomes more personal and therefore more of a disgrace. As a result, students become less able to face and deal with their setbacks” (p. 114).

Results of Dweck’s research on feedback appear, to contradict Rosenthal and Jacobson’s concept of the Pygmalion effect of teacher expectancy (as cited in Dweck, 2000). The Pygmalion effect is described as follows: “Telling children that they are smart should make them believe

that they are smart, and believing that they are smart should make them confident about taking on challenges and seeing them through" (p. 116). In their 1968 study, Rosenthal and Jacobson studied grade school teachers who were told at the beginning of the school year that certain students in their classes would bloom over the coming school year. "These findings were taken to mean that when teachers think children are smart, and convey this to them, children thrive" (p. 116). Rosenthal and Jacobson instructed the teachers that this message should be "conveyed to children, at every opportunity that they are smart and this will aid their achievement" (p. 116). They did not directly tell teachers that certain children were smart or disclose their intelligence quotients (IQ). Rather, teachers were told that their children were likely to bloom; that they were open to learning, ready to grow, and could profit from teaching.

Dweck reported that the results of the study above led teachers to work more effectively with the children and not simply praise their intelligence (Dweck, 2000). In fact, children had been randomly assigned to various classrooms and results indicated that those children placed in a classroom with higher expectations made greater gains in achievement when compared to children from classes where teachers were not verbally given high expectations. By not making any recommendations about their students there was more attention given to the adverse effects of negative labeling. "Rather than switching students out of the entity framework, in which intelligence is evaluated and labeled, many believed that the answer lay in making children feel good about their intelligence within that framework" (p. 117).

Research indicates children are often commended for good grades and high test scores, but "complimenting children for their intelligence and academic performance may lead them to believe that good test scores and high grades are more important than learning or mastering something new" (Dweck & Mueller, 1999, p. 112). Complimenting students may leave them

unprepared for handling unpredictable circumstances. When a teacher gives feedback to students they are conveying a message that affects students' opinion of themselves, their motivation, and their achievement (Dweck, 1999). According to Dweck, intelligence messages or labels have an undermining effect; good or bad, these messages or labels teach children that their underlying intelligence can be judged from their performance. "It is not a good idea to encourage the achievement of underachieving groups by praising their intelligence when they succeed, even though it may be very tempting to boost their faith in themselves" (p. 121). As a means of children overcoming failures; attention, approval, efforts, and/or strategies of learning should be focused on rather than how smart they are. "Low achievers do not need inflating praise as much as they need to know how to interpret setbacks and what to do when they occur. Students must learn that a challenge is something that promotes learning, not something that indicts their ability" (p. 122).

Teachers and parents often believe they should praise their children's intelligence in order for the children to feel smart. Dweck stated, "Giving students easy tasks and praising their successes tells students that you think they are dumb" (Dweck, 1999, p. 113). As a result of Dweck's 30 years of research, she has concluded that children whose intelligence had been praised were obsessed with their intelligence and proving it to others. These children constantly worried about how smart they looked and feared failure. Also, these children frequently thought that having to work harder to succeed showed that they were less intelligent as compared to their peers. The students with lower intelligence levels were more focused on the process of learning and/or strategies needed to complete a task and less concerned about their intelligence. Overall, the fear is that praising children for intelligence can hook and make them dependent on such praise.

The students who had been praised for their effort were influenced to think of intelligence in terms of their motivation, knowledge, and skills over which they had control (Dweck, 1999). Various types of praise and criticism that students receive from their teachers and parents, "tell them how to think about what they do and what they are" (Dweck, 1999, p. 114).

Dweck indicates that teachers and parents cannot forget about students' feelings, their ideas about themselves, and their motivation (1999). No matter how objective praise is, it conveys messages about what is important to the person who is giving the praise, what aspects of the student are important to him or her, and what the student should think of him or herself. This message has a potentially powerful effect on children, especially on their performance. Dweck stated that it is important for children to develop their own identities, rather than become what adults make them into through influential praise.

Children who are praised for their intelligence may think that high test scores are more important than learning itself. These children are more likely to give up on challenging tasks due to feelings of inadequacy. Dweck (1999) states that students should not be motivated by statements of praise relating to their intelligence. This is likely to cause children to work harder to keep the label of being gifted or highly intelligent than teaching them to actually learn to increase their knowledge. Giving praise can make students more passive and dependent on something that they feel they cannot control thus setting them into a system in which "setbacks signify incompetence and their effort will be recognized as a weakness rather than a key to success" (Dweck, 1999, p. 115).

"When gifted students are praised with intelligence they react more poorly to setbacks and worry that mistakes, confusions, or failures mean that they do not deserve the



coveted label. If being gifted makes them special, then losing the label may mean to them that they are “ordinary” and less worthy” (Dweck, 2000, p. 122).

Students who have put forth effort into their work and are unsuccessful feel as though they are less competent than their peers (Dweck, 1999). The students who feel that they are less competent state that school achievement is important to them, but one of their goals in school is to exert as little effort as possible to gain success. There are also students who perceive the opposite. These students feel as though poor performance is due to a lack of effort, which in turn motivates them to study harder. They also see effort as worthwhile and important. Dweck believes that effort is necessary for students to realize their potential.

Dweck is not opposed to praising students, but she believes it should be done more effectively.

“We can praise as much as we please when they learn or do well, but should act enthusiastic about their strategies, not about how their performance reveals an attribute they are likely to view as innate and beyond their control. We can rave about their effort, their concentration, the effectiveness of their study strategies, the interesting ideas they came up with, the way they followed through” (Dweck, 1999, p. 114).

It is also important to ask students questions that show their intelligence and appreciation of their work as well as the effort they have exhibited. This demonstrates to children that teachers are appreciative of their work. This is a much more constructive tactic and does not carry negative side effects (Dweck, 1999).

When a student impresses a teacher by working on a less challenging project, and gets it done quickly, teachers should not praise them for their ability (Dweck, 1999). They should not be giving students the “impression that we place a high value on their doing perfect work on

tasks that are easy for them” (p. 115). Dweck believes that a better approach would be apologizing to the student for wasting time with something that was too simple, and moving him or her to a more challenging task. When a student masters a more challenging task, teachers should be showing their approval for the effort. When children are taught the value of strategizing, concentrating, and working hard when dealing with academic challenges, they are encouraging themselves to sustain their performance, motivation, and self-esteem (Dweck & Mueller, 1998). “Children should be praised for how they do their work rather than for the final product of their ability” (p. 115).

Aronson and Freid, (as cited in Dweck 1999), conducted a study on minority students at a university. They taught the students to view their intelligence as an outcome that could be developed through hard work. They did this by creating and showing a film that explained the neural changes in the brain that take place every time a student is confronted with difficulty and exerts effort. In this study, the students who were taught the relationship between intelligence and effort earned significantly higher grades when compared to those who were not taught the difference. This study is similar to Dweck’s praise studies in that “students’ ideas about their intelligence can be influenced by the message they receive and when ideas change, changes in performance can follow” (Dweck, 1999, p. 116).

Rigorous standards are required for students to achieve a high level of performance. According to Dweck (1999), some students are going to meet these rigorous standards while others will not. This will not eliminate any pitfalls. In fact, it may actually convey the notion that intelligence is a gift that only certain students possess. It will not teach students to value learning, focus on the process of achievement, or how to deal with obstacles. These students may have a greater fear failure because, to them, it is taking away a measure of their intelligence

(Dweck, 1999). Dweck's research suggests a different approach than trying to convince students that they are smart. Instead, teachers should take the following steps:

1. Get students to focus on their potential to learn
2. Teach students to value challenge and learning over looking smart
3. Teach students to concentrate on effort and learning to process in the face of an obstacle.

These steps can be followed while instilling rigorous standards. With this approach, tasks are challenging and effort is highly valued, required, and rewarded. During these tasks, students will receive evaluations of their current level of performance and skill, but it must be clear to the students that the evaluations are not an assessment of their intelligence or innate ability (Dweck, 1999). With this framework, easy work is not given in order to ensure constant success. That would be similar to telling students who are performing poorly that they are doing well in order to make them feel smart. Nor do we want to give students work that is too challenging for them, in essence, setting them up for failure.

Giving students work that is too challenging for them may result in them staying up until all hours, working hard due to the fear of displeasing their parents and teachers. Dweck (1999) reported that pushing students too hard is not teaching them the value of hard work and will not orient them towards developing their potential. Giving students a pile of homework does not teach them the importance of effort. Furthermore, they should be "taught to seek challenging tasks and to engage in an active learning process" (p. 116).

In order for students to be successful when given more challenging tasks by teachers, educators must do their part. They must help students acquire skills they need for learning and be available as resources for learning. Educators can keep praising effort, but be conscious of

giving students the same lines. Educators must help students to know how to apply their effort appropriately. "It is necessary that we as educators understand and teach students how to engage in processes that foster learning, things like task analysis and study skills" (Dweck, 1999, p. 116).

### *Entity Theory or Theory of Fixed Intelligence*

The entity theory states that students who received praise for being intelligent were influenced to think of intelligence as something people are born with, which Dweck terms the entity theory. Practices that engage children's minds in examining aspects of their own experiences and environments can help them make their own realistic criteria of self-esteem. A deep sense of self-esteem, competence, and self-worth can provide a firm foundation for a student's future, according to Liliar (1993).

Positive self-esteem and meaningful self-evaluation are usually the results of accomplishments. "The Myth of Feeling Good about Oneself," by Stevenson (1996), suggests that praise is one source of feedback, and that self-esteem comes from awareness that the requirements have been mastered. Teaching children to be sensitive to feelings is great, but providing them with phrases such as "you're a great buddy," or "you're a good student" is not teaching them anything.

Children thrive from respect and being cared for by others. Educators are eager to encourage students who are lacking in their studies, but a myth has developed that raising a child's self-esteem will improve achievement and solve many of the nation's problems, according to Stevenson (1996). There is no doubt that high self-esteem is a precondition for learning, but this emphasis has been so heavy that some call it the self-esteem movement, the practice of supplying positive feedback regardless of the quality of performance.

Begley and Rogers (1998) describe evidence that parents and teachers who inflate children's self-esteem by telling them they are wonderful, can be dangerous. Begley and Rogers concluded that this action could trigger hostility and aggression, as well as stir up underlying violence. "If kids develop unrealistic opinions about themselves and those views are rejected by others, the kids are potentially dangerous" (p. 1).

Begley and Rogers (1998) also concluded that an inflated self-esteem has a powerful effect on aggression. Unjustified self-esteem needs constant reassurance. The American Psychological Association stated that "schools often contribute to the problem by viewing self-esteem as a cause of success, rather than the result of achievement" (as cited in Dweck & Mueller, 1999, p. 2). James Gilligan (as cited in Dweck & Muller), a leading violence researcher from Harvard Medical School, suggested that schools and parents may be encouraging an inappropriate type of self-esteem and he believes this type is likely to deflate.

Psychologists have believed that low self-esteem can cause aggression and other pathologies, but high self-esteem, "the kind that can come from not actual achievement but from teachers and parents drumming into kids how great they are" may also be dangerous and can trigger hostility and aggression (Begley & Rogers, 1998, p. 1).

"Perceptions are received from the environment; ideas are developed from perceptions and can be defined as internal thoughts about self" (Bernhoft, 1987, p. 4). In researching Felker's Five Key Self-Concept Enhancement, (i.e., praise self, praise others, self-evaluate, set goals, and evaluate realistically), Bernhoft concluded that the positive self-referent language or a positive self-concept would probably influence the sense of belonging, competence, and work which are factors that are frequently discussed as making up one's self-esteem.

Some self-esteem enhancement strategies include one-to-one strategies that helps children see themselves in a more positive way (Margerison, 1996). The person praising a student should be an adult, not necessarily a teacher, but someone whom the child sees as significant in his/her life. When the adult praising the student enters the classroom or school this will help the child feel important and needed. This will help encourage children to see themselves in a more positive manner, which will increase their ability to set more realistic learning goals as well as more feasible expectations for themselves.

Another set of self-esteem enhancement strategies involve children in group situations with their peers. These group strategies also will help children increase their social skills. In this non-threatening situation, children who have a sense of inadequacy help build their own confidence by contributing ideas to the group. The composition of each group needs to be put together carefully. If a group is created in which a particular child is with dominant and confident peers, the particular child's self-esteem may be damaged. It is important that the other children are able to listen and encourage that particular child's participation (Margerison, 1996).

The aim of praising students is to improve behavior or performance through altering self-image. A child's level of self-esteem is a controlling factor of behavior, ability to learn, and ability to work with other people. It is important that the praise in a classroom not be confused with behavior modification. Behavior modification is related to changing specific behaviors. It is important to remember that the strategies used to enhance an individual's self-esteem will benefit the rest of the classroom. "Everyone benefits when an individual child feels good" (Margerison, 1996). "We help people to grow by holding rational expectations of them, not by expecting nothing of them" (Braden, 1998, p. 2). If a teacher avoids ridicule and other belittling

remarks, treats students with respect, deals with everyone fairly, and is confident in every student's potential, the teacher is promoting self-esteem and the process of learning.

Morris Rosenberg (as cited by Ward, n. d.) concluded in his book entitled, "Society and the Adolescent Self-Image" that "parent and educational tactics are two of the most important factors influencing the development of self-esteem in children and adolescents" (p. 6). In addition, Stanley Coopersmith (1967, as cited in Ward, 1999) established a link between children's and adolescents' levels of self-esteem and the parenting style of their parents. The correlation between self-esteem and the ability of a person to lead a productive and successful life was established. Liliar (1993) identified that self-esteem is enhanced in children when their parents and teachers provide an optimal mixture of acceptance, affection, limits, and expectations. The development of self-esteem is most likely to advance when children are respected and receive meaningful feedback in the form of appreciation rather than empty praise and flattery. Liliar also advocates that healthy self-esteem is more likely to begin when children are engaged in activities that allow them to make real decisions and contributions than in more playful activities. "Self-esteem can be based on increased understanding and competence, as well as on contributing to the work of the group" (Liliar, 1993, p. 3). By enhancing self-esteem, parents and teachers praise children's successes, praise good effort, give affection, and let children know that they are loved and wanted. People who show an interest in the child's activities, problems, or projects, and tell children what to do instead of what not to do, are helping to increase the self-esteem of that child (Nuttall, 1999).

Margerison (1996) reported that many children in today's society bring low self-esteem with them into the classroom resulting from outside factors such as broken homes, poverty, and

racial or class prejudice. He advocates that we need to educate the whole child and not forget about the emotional side of learning as that too is important.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, there are two conflicting strategies used to praise students in the classroom. One strategy, the incremental theory, promotes praising students' achievement and efforts to enhance their self-esteem. Another strategy, the entity theory, asserts that students earn their self-esteem by actively seeking praise for their intelligence, effort, and achievements. The purpose of this study was to determine the levels of endorsement of various types of praise statements by elementary teachers in Wisconsin.



## Chapter III: Methodology

### *Subject Selection and Description*

The survey used in this study was mailed to 60 randomly selected kindergarten through fifth grade teachers licensed in Wisconsin. Twenty-six of the 60 surveys sent were returned, resulting in a return rate of 43%. The participating sample consisted of 26 teachers, 5 male and 21 female. A majority of the participants were under fifty years of age. For a specific breakdown by age refer to Chapter 3, Table 2. Approximately 35% of the sample taught students at grades kindergarten through second grade, while another 35% taught students at third through fifth grades, and approximately 29% taught students above the fifth grade level. The 29% who taught above the fifth grade level were listed on the Department of Public Instruction's database as elementary teachers; however, they were not currently teaching at a grade level between kindergarten and fifth. These teachers' surveys were not included in the results of this study. For a specific breakdown by grade level please refer to Chapter 3, Table 3.

### *Instrumentation*

A nine-item survey developed by the researcher and validated by professors of the School Psychology Program at the University of Wisconsin-Stout was utilized to gather the desired data from teachers regarding statements of praise based upon different scenarios (Appendix A). Items one through five provided brief scenarios about students with varying levels of academic ability and effort. The teachers were asked to rate the level of advisability of each of three statements that might provide feedback to the student described in a specific scenario. The teachers rated three different statements of praise on a five-point scale ranging from highly advisable to highly unadvisable, with an option for the teachers to write in their own statement of praise. The scenarios were as follows:

- The first scenario is about an average student who exerted a high level of effort to maintain good grades.
- The second scenario is about an above average student who avoids challenging optional work.
- The third scenario involves an average student who does not put forth extra effort to meet tough challenges.
- The fourth scenario is about an above average student who seeks new challenges and exerts a high level of effort.
- The fifth scenario involves a student with a reading disability who exerts little effort.

The final four questions included basic demographic information such as sex, age, years of experience, and grade level teaching.

#### *Data Collection*

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was contacted via telephone in order to obtain a diskette of all licensed teachers in the state. This listing was filtered by removing all names of teachers who were currently teaching above the fifth grade level, resulting in a list of approximately 300 teachers. This list of 300 teachers was then randomized by selecting every fifth name. A packet was developed and mailed to the randomly selected teachers. This packet included an introduction letter describing why the participant received the mailing, expressed that participation was voluntary, and supplied information regarding whom to contact with any questions or concerns. Included with the introduction letter was a description of directions on how to complete the survey. In addition to the survey, the packet included a

prepaid, self-addressed, stamped envelope to be utilized by the participants in order to return the survey.

## Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to describe how teachers praise students in the classroom as measured by a questionnaire. The survey used in this study was mailed to 60 randomly selected kindergarten through fifth grade teachers licensed in Wisconsin. Descriptive data, response frequencies, and percentages were used to describe the survey results.

### *Demographics*

Demographic data regarding the study's sample are outlined in Tables 1-4. Of 60 surveys sent, 26 were completed and returned, yielding a return rate of 43%. As seen in Table 1, 21 of the respondents were female (81%) and 5 were male (19%). Respondents ranged in age from 20 to over 60 years old with the majority (31%) falling in the age ranges of 40-50 and 50-60 (27%); see Table 2. As seen in Table 3, a majority of the respondents were teachers in grades higher than fifth. Table 4 shows that a majority of the respondents (80%) have more than five years teaching experience.

Table 1

### *Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Gender*

Gender	N	Percent
Male	5	19%
Female	21	81%

Table 2

*Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Age*

Age	N	Percent
20-30	5	19.23%
30-40	6	23.08%
40-50	8	30.77%
50-60	0	0%
60 or older	7	26.92%

Table 3

*Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Grade Taught*

Grade	N	Percent
Kindergarten	0	0%
First	4	15.38%
Second	7	26.92%
Third	2	7.69%
Fourth	8	30.77%
Fifth	1	3.85%
Other	9	34.62%

*Note.* Some respondents teach two classes. Other respondents were classified by the Department of Instruction as elementary teachers but actually had other teaching responsibilities (34.62%).

Table 4

*Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Years of Experience*

Years of Experience	N	Percent
1-5	5	19.23%
6-10	6	23.08%
11-15	8	30.77%
16-20	0	0%
20 or more	7	26.92%

*Scenarios*

Scenarios 5 through 9 show how teachers rated each scenario based on effort, achievement, or intelligence on a Likert-type scale from highly advisable to highly unadvisable.

*Scenario 1.* Scenario 1 read as follows: "Dave, who is an average student in your class, spends extra practice time on an assignment. In return he receives a grade of an A." Table 5 outlines the results for this scenario.

In scenario 1, 81% of teachers surveyed agreed that a statement of effort would benefit this particular student. Only 35% of the teachers concluded that a statement of ability was advisable in feedback to a student who spends extra time on assignments. Fifty-four percent of the respondents concluded that a statement of achievement would also be advisable for this student. See Table 5 for more information.

Table 5

*Scenario 1*

Response	Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
Effort: "Taking extra time to practice seems to pay off"	8 31%	13 50%	5 19%	0 0%	0 0%
Achievement: "See, I knew you could do it."	5 19%	14 54%	5 19%	2 7%	0 0%
Ability: "You obviously have the ability to do this."	3 12%	6 23%	9 35%	8 30%	0 0%

*Scenario 2.* Scenario 2 read as follows: "Debbie is an A+ student in your class. She receives perfect grades on the work required, but avoids trying more challenging optional work."

Table 6 describes the results.

Table 6

*Scenario 2*

Response	Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
Effort: "I know you will do fine if you try harder assignments"	2 7%	7 27%	8 31%	9 35%	0 0%
Achievement: "You're smart enough to get A's on the more challenging homework too."	0 0%	6 23%	9 35%	10 38%	1 4%
Ability: "We all need to exercise our abilities by working on difficult tasks."	3 12%	11 42%	5 19%	6 23%	1 4%

A majority of the people surveyed agreed that praising ability would be most effective for this particular student. More than half of the people surveyed avoided the effort statement in this

scenario. Seventy-five percent of the respondents agreed that statements acknowledging success without an explanation or in reference to ability would be best for this particular student. They did not conclude that making any statement commenting on effort would benefit a student such as this in becoming more motivated to attempt more challenging optional work

*Scenario 3.* Scenario 3 read as follows: "Tom's work is fine when the work is not very challenging, but he does not put in the extra effort to meet the tough challenges. Tom is now faced with a very challenging worksheet. He quickly gives up." See Table 7 for results.

Table 7

*Scenario 3*

Response	Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
Effort: "It's better to try and fail than to not try at all"	1 4%	7 27%	8 31%	8 31%	2 7%
Achievement: "Let's see if you can be one of the few who can get it the first time"	0 0%	9 35%	7 27%	8 31%	2 7%
Ability: "I think you have the capabilities to finish the worksheet successfully"	2 7%	16 62%	5 19%	3 12%	0 0%

In this scenario, 69% of the respondents felt as though a statement of ability would be advisable. The responses for achievement and effort were similar in this scenario. Thirty-one indicated that the effort statement would be advisable. Another 38% felt as though an



achievement statement would be unadvisable. Praising a student's ability in this particular instance was determined to be effective by the people surveyed in order to motivate the student to attempt a more challenging task.

*Scenario 4.* Scenario 4 read as follows:

Nancy is constantly striving to master new challenges in math. She always likes to be ahead of the class. You allow her to work at her own pace. She is receiving an A on the work that is mostly self-taught. However, right now she is frustrated because she has been unsuccessful with four new assignments.

Table 8

*Scenario 4*

Response	Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
Effort: "Perhaps you should go back and work with the rest of the class."	0 0%	0 0%	5 19%	15 58%	6 23%
Achievement: "Some new topics are just going to take more time and effort."	5 19%	15 65%	2 12%	2 0%	1 0%
Ability: "I know you are smart enough to figure this out"	0 0%	7 27%	8 31%	9 35%	2 7%

*Note.* One participant did not report an answer for the achievement statement, resulting in an n of 25.

As shown in Table 8, a statement praising a student's effort was chosen as most unadvisable according to 85% of the respondents. Eighty-four percent felt as though a statement of achievement would be the best way to praise a particular student in this situation.

*Scenario 5.* Scenario 5 read as follows: "Jerry has a diagnosed reading disability and is included in the general education classroom for all other subjects. Throughout the day you call on students that volunteer to read out loud in class. Jerry never volunteers."

Table 9

*Scenario 5*

Response	Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
Effort: "You may not be perfect at everything; you may just have to practice harder at reading."	0 0%	2 12%	2 7%	7 54%	19 27%
Achievement: "Why do you never volunteer?"	0 0%	3 7%	2 7%	14 31%	6 54%
Ability: "What could I do to make reading out loud in class a little easier for you?"	11 42%	11 42%	3 12%	1 4%	0 0%

*Note.* One person surveyed did not opt for a given selection.

A statement regarding a student's effort by simply asking why the student does not volunteer was determined to be the most unproductive way to motivate this student to read in the classroom according to 85% of the respondents.

*Summary*

The present study examined teacher's perceptions on praising students based on ability, effort, or achievement. Results indicate that teachers in this study that are currently teaching kindergarten through fifth grade in Wisconsin are more likely to praise students based on ability over the effort or achievement. In three out of five scenarios, the teachers rated the ability statements to be the most productive ways to praise. The least chosen way to praise students, according to this sample, was by using statements of effort.

Overall, the respondents tended to prefer statements of effort or ability; achievement was never their first choice. Teachers also tended to rate each scenario based on each student's needs as opposed to choosing based on effort, achievement, or ability throughout the survey.

## Chapter V: Discussion

### *Limitations*

One of the greatest limitations to the current study is that the sample is not representative of teachers nationwide. Kindergarten through fifth grade teachers from a small sample in Wisconsin were represented. Due to the limited sample size and inaccurate representation of the general population of teachers, the results of this study cannot be generalized to schoolteachers nationwide.

Another limitation to this study is that it did not examine any possible correlations between how teachers perceive themselves to praise students in the classroom and how they actually praise students in the classroom.

A third limitation to this study is the choices on the Likert scale. If this study were to be replicated it would more beneficial to use the term “least advisable” as opposed to “highly unadvisable” for more consistency between choices.

A final limitation is contradictory literature on praising intelligence. Some research concludes that praising intelligence is beneficial, while other research concludes that praising intelligence is detrimental to students’ emotions. Not only is this a limitation to this study, but it is a call for further research.

### *Major Findings*

Findings from past studies (Mueller & Dweck, 2000) suggest that good test scores and high grades are more important than learning or mastering something new. In return, this will leave children unprepared for coping with setbacks. Initially, it was this researcher’s contention that teachers had pre-conceived ideas about how students should be praised. It was also thought that by never defining how the students were being praised, (ability, effort, or achievement)

could be detrimental. Therefore, the current study focused on research to determine how teachers in Wisconsin judge alternative statements, specifically questioning if students are being praised on ability, effort, or achievement.

According to Dweck, (1999), a label of ability may teach students that their underlying intelligence can be judged by their performance which can be detrimental to a student's self-esteem.

The result of this research indicates that kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in Wisconsin were more likely to praise achievement over intelligence and effort over achievement. At times the findings indicate a teacher may choose effort over intelligence. It is also concluded that kindergarten through fifth grade teachers perceive achievement as the most advisable way to praise students in their classes. Dweck's research states that praising students' effort, or potential to learn, gives students the message that effort is the key to learning and the students have the responsibility and control over their achievement and self-esteem. As stated in the literature review by Dweck, (1999), students who are striving to master new challenges and be at the top of the class are aware that setbacks may be involved, but they are able to bounce back which is a valuable skill in life and school.

Praising students' abilities by asking what the teacher can do to make the student's reading disability easier, or by stating that more practice will make the students disability less apparent does not benefit a student according to Dweck's theory of giving students ownership of their self-esteem. It is important that all students are self-advocates and ask for assistance when their needs are not being met. The teacher's most advisable way to praise students is through intelligence.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' ways of praising students in the classroom. One objective was to determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on the incremental theory. The second objective was to determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on the entity theory. The third objective was to determine to what extent elementary school teachers in Wisconsin endorse praise statements based on achievement. It was found that the respondents in this group are more likely to endorse praise statements based on ability. Statements based on effort were chosen some of the time. These statements of praise were followed by explanations. Amongst the respondents it is also concluded that statements of achievement were least likely to be beneficial for the students to make gains based on each scenario. Statements of achievement do not provide explanations.

### *Recommendations*

This study generated many questions to be answered in future research. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study targeting a more nationally representative sample so that the findings may be generalized to a greater population of teachers.

Additionally, future studies might consider if there is consistency between what teachers say they do and what they really do. It is important that a student is praised in the correct manner to avoid further complications that may be detrimental in a student's life. Finally, future research should obtain data on what form of praise is most beneficial in a student's overall life.

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## Appendix A: Consent Letter

April 23, 2001

Dear Sir or Madam:

As a certified elementary teacher in Wisconsin, you have been selected to participate in a survey regarding recommended ways to provide feedback on student performance. While the survey looks long, the completion of this survey should only take approximately 10 minutes. I realize this is a busy time of year for all involved, and I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance.

Your responses will be used to determine the most effective ways to provide feedback in order to increase student performance.

The completion and return of this survey implies that you have volunteered to participate in this study. No identifying information will be used and confidentiality is strictly guaranteed. You have the right to refuse to participate, and you may withdraw from participation at any time.

I have enclosed an envelope for your convenience in returning your completed survey. If you have any questions or concerns, you may call me at (920) 299-3849, or e-mail me at [meilahna@cesa5.k12.wi.us](mailto:meilahna@cesa5.k12.wi.us), or contact my research advisor Dr. Ed. Biggerstaff at (715) 232-2410, or e-mail him at [biggerstaffe@uwstout.edu](mailto:biggerstaffe@uwstout.edu). Thank you in advance for your prompt cooperation in answering these questions.

NOTE: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the research advisor and second to Sue Foxwell, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11HH, UW-Stout Menomonie, WI. 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

Sincerely,

Angie Meilahn

University of Wisconsin-Stout

Graduate Student-School Psychology

## Appendix B: Teacher Praise Questionnaire

## ASKING EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

I would like you to provide input for New TEACHERS on possible ways to provide feedback on student performance! Please read each specific scenario and rate it according to each of the several possible responses.

Please rate each statement related to its **advisability** as a form of feedback that **encourages good work**. In rating a statement as advisable or highly advisable, you would be saying that this feedback might foster increased effort, openness to new challenges, and/or an opportunity to learn something positive from successes and failures.

In rating a statement as unadvisable or highly unadvisable, you would be saying that the feedback might diminish effort, enhance a child's reluctance to approach new challenges, and/or encourage to learn something negative from his or her success and failures. If at any point you feel there is a more highly advisable response, please feel free to add it.

Please rate each statement by circling the advisability level.

+++++

**Dave, who is an average student in your class, spends extra practice time on an assignment. In return, he receives a grade of an A. What is your opinion about the following comments?**

A. "Taking extra time to practice seems to pay off?"

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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B. "See, I knew you could do it."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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C. "You obviously have the ability to do this."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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D. Please write another statement that would be highly advisable

Debbie is an A+ student in your class. She receives perfect grades on work required, but avoids trying more challenging optional work. What is your opinion about the following comments?

A. "I know you will do fine if you try harder assignments."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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B. "You are smart enough to receive A's on the more challenging homework also."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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C. "We all need to exercise our abilities by working on tasks that might be really difficult."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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D. Please write another statement that would be highly advisable.

Tom's work is fine when the work is not very challenging, but he does not put in the extra effort to meet the tough challenges. Tom now is faced with a very challenging worksheet. He quickly gives up. What is your opinion about the following comments?

A. "It's better to try and fail than to not try at all."

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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B. "Let's see if you can be one of the few who can get it the first time?"

<b>Highly Advisable</b>	<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unadvisable</b>	<b>Highly Unadvisable</b>
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C. "I think you have the capabilities to finish the worksheet successfully."

**Highly Advisable      Advisable      Neutral      Unadvisable      Highly Unadvisable**

D. Please write another statement that would be highly advisable.

\_\_\_\_\_

Nancy is constantly striving to master new challenges in math. She always likes to be ahead of the class. You allow her to work at her own pace. She is receiving an A on the work that is mostly self-taught. However, right now she is frustrated because she has been unsuccessful with four new assignments. What is your opinion about the following comments?

A. "Perhaps you should go back and work with the rest of the class."

Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
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B. "Some new topics are just going to take more time and effort."

Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
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C. "I know you are smart enough to figure this out."

**Highly Advisable      Advisable      Neutral      Unadvisable      Highly Unadvisable**

D. Please write another statement that would be highly advisable.

\_\_\_\_\_

Jerry has a diagnosed reading disability and is included in the general education classroom for all other subjects. Throughout the day you call on students that volunteer to read out loud in class. Jerry never volunteers. What is your opinion about the following comments?

A. “Why do you never volunteer?”

Highly Advisable	Advisable	Neutral	Unadvisable	Highly Unadvisable
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B. "You may not be perfect at everything; you may just have to practice harder at reading than Science."

**Highly  
Advisable**

## Advisable

## Neutral

**Unadvisable**

**Highly  
Unadvisable**

C. "What could I do to make reading out loud in class a little easier for you?"

**Highly  
Advisable**

## Advisable

## Neutral

**Unadvisable**

**Highly  
Unadvisable**

D. Please write another statement that would be highly advisable.

--

[illegible]

Demographic Information (Please check the appropriate category)

Male

\_\_\_\_\_ Female

Age:

\_\_\_\_\_ 20-30    \_\_\_\_\_ 30-40    \_\_\_\_\_ 40-50    \_\_\_\_\_ 50-60    \_\_\_\_\_ 60+

Years teaching:

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-5      \_\_\_\_\_ 6-10      \_\_\_\_\_ 11-15      \_\_\_\_\_ 16-20      \_\_\_\_\_ 20+

What grade do you teach?

\_\_\_\_\_K      \_\_\_\_\_1      \_\_\_\_\_2      \_\_\_\_\_3      \_\_\_\_\_4      \_\_\_\_\_5

\_\_\_\_\_6 \_\_\_\_\_ Other