The impact of behavior-specific praise on student engagement

Evelyn Soto
California State University, Monterey Bay

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The Impact of Behavior-Specific Praise on Student Engagement

Evelyn Soto

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University, Monterey Bay

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THE IMPACT OF BEHAVIOR SPECIFIC PRAISE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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by

Evelyn Soto

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

DR. CAROLINA SERNA  
ACTION THESIS ADVISOR

DR. LOU DENTI  
CULMINATING MAE PROJECT INSTRUCTOR

5-12-14

DATE

5-14-2014

DATE
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Abstract

Behavior-specific praise (BSP) is one motivational tool that has the potential to increase student engagement and eagerness to learn. In this study, the use of BSP was explored. Over a one-month study, third-grade students were given BSP during math instruction. Student nonverbal cues (i.e., eye contact, completing seatwork), peer interaction, and class participation were observed and tracked to determine if the use of BSP increased student engagement. Key findings in students’ responses to BSP included: 1) acquired perseverance and confidence to complete a given task; 2) increased student initiative to exceed teacher expectations as demonstrated by their use of strategies; and 3) strengthened peer communication during group work. Reflecting on my teaching practice, the study findings also indicated that increasing the amount of praise I gave to my students influenced the learning environment allowing for students to facilitate their own learning and giving BSP resulted in valuable student feedback necessary in order for me to implement this process long term.
THE IMPACT OF BEHAVIOR SPECIFIC PRAISE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM STATEMENT

Introduction

Motivating students to perform to their academic and social potential is key in promoting student success. However, student motivation for elementary teachers continues to be a complex set of skills requiring a keen understanding of developmental milestones and the social and emotional issues students bring to school each day. To offset some of the behavioral and motivational challenges teachers face each day, behavior-specific praise (BSP), a motivational strategy, appears to be an effective method to assist students in increasing classroom participation and academic achievement. Behavior-specific praise explicitly identifies the behavior for which the student is being praised (Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Martin, 2007).

Some students are more engaged in a lesson than others, whether it is the student’s extrinsic motivation from teachers commending their ability/effort, or the intrinsic motivation of wanting to succeed. Many teachers utilize some form of extrinsic motivation (e.g., tickets, rewards) to ensure compliance. This helps to increase task perseverance, which in turn leads to class participation and academic achievement. However, for students to be intrinsically motivated requires a sophisticated interplay between appropriate praise and building positive student-teacher relationships. Students who develop meaningful relationships with their teachers have been known to foster positive attitudes towards school and more dedicated engagement in the learning environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denti, 2012).

Although there have been numerous studies which have generated practical strategies to increase motivation, applying those methods in a consistent manner requires an enhanced understanding of the efficacy of these approaches. Student motivation remains a pressing issue to
educators everywhere (Brophy, 1987). The purpose of this paper was to determine whether using BSP would increase student engagement and impact class participation.

Problem Statement

Educators continue to be confronted with students, for one reason or another, that seemingly do not possess the drive to engage and actively participate in class activities. If these motivational challenges are not properly addressed, they can significantly impact academic performance. Students who display active engagement in school see learning as a rewarding and positive experience and are more likely to pursue higher education (Marks, 2000). One way to increase student engagement and enthusiasm to learn is through teacher praise and recognition. Students respond positively when praise statements are thoughtful, targeted, and meet students' personal needs (Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2009). Praise or encouragement, when directly associated with a specific task or contingent behavior, increases the likelihood that the student will be motivated to perform the task or behavioral requirement intended or set up by the teacher. Teacher praise, an affirmative statement issued by the teacher following a specific academic or social behavior, reinforces the desired behavior (Partin et al., 2009; Musti-Rao & Haydon, 2011). Often times praise statements are too vague (e.g., Good work!) and do not specifically address the desired behavior (e.g., I am so proud to know that you studied all week for this test.). When praise or recognition is not targeted, students tend to remain disengaged in lessons, thus not performing to their ability.

Although schools have intensified professional development to promote positive school climate, school-wide positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS), and non-bullying programs, the classroom teacher today still seems woefully unprepared to deal with the exigencies of the wide array of student academic and behavioral challenges. Teachers have a
tendency to revert to a rule-based negative reinforcement system punishing students for their transgressions. Former research supported this point indicating that one of the factors in creating discipline problems is the overuse of punishments as a solution to misbehavior (Wasicsko & Ross, 1994). There continues to be a lack of both understanding and adequate training for educators in how to use encouragement, recognition, and praise. Therefore, there is a need to equip teachers with methods they can use to reward students for task perseverance, class participation, and praise, and encourage students in a manner that motivates them to become independent and perform to or above their ability.

**Purpose of Study**

Many students are unmotivated to perform to their potential, thus resulting in less student engagement and low academic achievement. Praise can serve as a motivational tool to potentially increase student engagement. Former studies of the implementation of BSP in a classroom setting have suggested that BSP can have various effects on a student’s motivation and academic performance (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). The focus of this study was on students’ responses to BSP and recognition in the classroom. The main purpose of this study was to examine the effects of using BSP and to determine if it impacts student engagement as evident through the frequency of class participation. The research also centered on the implementation of specific praise within my own teaching practices to observe how often I awarded BSP, how students responded to thoughtful, meaningful praise, and if it positively influenced their academic abilities and behavior choices.

Over a one-month study, I awarded my third grade students with BSP during math instruction. I monitored and observed their behavior, both verbal (i.e., comments and questions)
and nonverbal (on-task behavior, participation, peer interaction), to determine if BSP increased student engagement.

Research Questions

Within the context of my action research project, I proposed the following research questions:

- What is the impact of using frequent, behavior-specific praise with my third grade students with respect to increasing student engagement, as defined by frequency of class participation?
- In what ways will increasing the amount of praise I give to my students affect my professional development as a teacher?

Theoretical Model

Several theorists have researched ways in which individuals perceive themselves, how they respond to a given situation, and why they behave in that manner. The following theories will provide the background behind student self-concept and the underlying indicators that affect motivation in student learning. The theoretical models that form the basis of my study derive from Dewey, Maslow, and Bandura.

When teachers apply motivational strategies (i.e., praise for a job well done) in the classroom, it increases the likelihood that students will perform often above and beyond their capabilities. However, the teacher must consider the ways in which students process information, react to a task, and comprehend the subject at hand. Dewey (2010) believed that education should focus on an individuals’ entirety of potentialities. Embracing a child’s strengths and utilizing them in an educational setting creates the potential for growth. “An environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full
development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth” (Dewey, 2010, p 245). Students operate differently and gaining a better understanding of the child as a whole will determine what motivational strategies they respond to best.

Much of motivation centers on how teachers can capture their students’ strengths and interests. Getting to know the students as a whole can enhance the effects of motivation in the classroom. It is critical to be sensitive to students’ cognition and how it relates to their emotional feelings and intentions (Bredo, 2003). The powers and interests that a child possesses constitutes a major role in understanding their development. To neglect this understanding results in wasted time and effort in school (Dewey, 1897).

Meeting the needs of a student by providing an environment that is satisfying to them is pivotal to motivation. Maslow (1954) believed that an individual should be viewed as an integrated whole. He created a classification system known as the Hierarchy of Needs to articulate the importance of each need to be satisfied in a predetermined order before progressing to each subsequent level. As noted by Maslow (1954), the five-stage hierarchy of needs include:

1. Physiological needs (air, food, water, etc.)
2. Safety needs (stability, protection, order, etc.)
3. Belongingness and love needs (family, friends, relationships, etc.)
4. Esteem needs (self-esteem, achievement, competence, etc.)
5. Self-actualization needs (self-gratification, personal growth, realizing personal potential, etc.)

Each stage is dependent on the stage below it in order for the student to function as a whole individual. For a student to possess the confidence that they can achieve their goals in school, the previous stages must be fulfilled. It is not reasonable or fair to expect students to
establish school-related motivation if fundamental needs are not met. Students may achieve specific needs prematurely if schools encourage independence before the student feels safe and comfortable around others (Good & Brophy, 1977). Regardless of a student receiving BSP, it would be unlikely to impact student motivation if they lack the basic necessities to survive and live comfortably. While many needs may be absent in a child’s life, physiological needs would appear to be a major motivation; a child lacking love, self-esteem, and safety would desire food before any other need (Maslow, 1954).

Additionally, the remaining stages are just as essential to allow student growth at its utmost potential. Satisfying the need for love and belongingness offers a student a sense of satisfaction and appreciation. Praising a student for a job well done can validate their sense of belongingness and importance to the classroom environment, resulting in increased engagement and classroom participation. Satisfying esteem needs heightens self-confidence, worth, capability and usefulness in the world (Maslow, 1954). Positively acknowledging a child’s actions reassures them that they play a significant role in the world. Some students have acquired the mentality that they do not have the potential to perform specific tasks. In Maslow’s stage of self-actualization, they need to realize that only they have the choice to alter this mindset. “Every person is, in part, ‘his own project’ and makes himself” (Maslow, 1999, p. 214). As previously mentioned, these needs cannot be met unless prior stages have been fulfilled.

Furthermore, it is difficult for students to progress in school with the perception that they are not competent and capable of being successful. Albert Bandura best defined this as self-efficacy, which are people’s judgments of their capacities to perform (Bandura, 1986). When students are confronted with a task they are not confident in completing, many doubt their performance, having a fixed mind-set that they are not intelligent if they are unable to carry out
the task. How one views him or herself can determine how they will approach academic goals. Rather than focusing on an individual’s personal traits (i.e., physical or psychological), self-efficacy focuses on the individual’s ability to perform activities (Zimmerman, 1997). Bandura (as cited in Bandura, 1989) continued to state that people’s self-efficacy beliefs can determine their level of motivation, how much effort they are willing to expend, and how long they are willing to endure the obstacles. If they believe in their abilities, the greater their efforts will be. It is a teacher’s responsibility to enhance their students’ strengths and efforts on a given task by praising the specific action. This process is aided by knowing how his or her students respond to motivation.

One strategy many teachers apply in order to demonstrate appropriate classroom behavior is through modeling. All learning results from direct experiences, observing human behavior that they too would like to acquire (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1989). Vicarious experiences strongly impact personal efficacy. Awarding BSP will allow others to observe the same behavior that I am recognizing and display the same behavior. Much of social learning takes place through direct observation of behavior in everyday situations (Bandura, 1977).

Previous and current researchers, as mentioned, continue to investigate the drive behind motivation and the needs that are required for an individual to possess this drive. Providing the basic needs for an individual is necessary to function in life. Moreover, students must see themselves as being capable to accomplish a task in school despite its level of difficulty. The absence of the aforementioned fundamental needs may hinder students from gaining motivation and positively responding to praise.
Researcher Background

One of the biggest challenges for me after 10 years as a teacher is getting my entire class engaged in a lesson. Sustaining student engagement can be difficult when students are not motivated to pay attention and would rather display off-task behavior. As much as I try to teach a concept in various ways and accommodate different learning styles, many of the students continue to lack the motivation. Frustration would be the end result with academic achievement at a loss. It was not until recently that I realized that what many of the students desired was recognition and acknowledgement for their skills and effort towards an assigned task.

The school where I work serves primarily children of parents who are in the military, with several cultures being represented. Eight students are identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) in my class. Primary languages of the ELLs include Portuguese, German, Arabic, Malay, Nepali, and Greek. Three of the ELLs scored at the lower levels on the California English Development Test (CELDT). The lack of communication due to the language barrier impacts their level of motivation to participate in class activities. The willingness to demonstrate English language proficiency is dependent upon the students’ attitudes and motivation; motivation containing a direction relationship to second language acquisition (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In my experience, many of my students performing at advanced levels in their primary language lose the motivation to participate in my class because of their difficulty learning the English language. When meeting with parents of my ELLs, I am always told, “My child was very smart back in my country.” However, being unfamiliar with English, they become overwhelmed and intimidated resulting in very little, if any, student engagement and class participation. I feel these students would benefit with praise, both verbally (i.e.,
specific praise) and physically (e.g., smiling, thumbs up, nodding) to gain the encouragement to participate and remain engaged in class activities.

Many of my on-grade level and high achieving students consistently participate in class activities without the need for praise and continually perform well in all academic areas. Students who are already highly motivated are persistent in their efforts and are able to deal with challenges (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Meanwhile, my low performing students' behavior remains static as does their academic performance. In contrast, I do have some students for whom, although they may do well academically, remaining on task during a lesson can be a challenge.

Definition of Terms

- **Behavior-specific praise (BSP):** A statement in which the teacher specifies the behavior for which the praise is delivered (Musti-Rao & Haydon, 2011).

- **California English Language Development Test (CELDT):** A test required by state law that is given to students in K-12 grade whose primary language is not English. Test areas include listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English (http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/cefceldt.asp).

- **Entity Theory:** Self-theory viewing intelligence as unchangeable (Dweck & Master, 2008).

- **Extrinsic Motivation:** Engagement by external factors (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

- **Incremental Theory:** Self-theory viewing intelligence as malleable (Dweck & Master, 2008).

- **Intrinsic Motivation:** Engagement motivated by enjoyment (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).
• **Learning Goal**: Goals focused on increasing competence in a specific academic discipline (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

• **Motivation**: A hypothetical construct to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of goal-directed behavior (Good & Brophy, 1977, p. 328).

• **Performance Goal**: Goals individuals seek to maintain positive judgments of their abilities (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

• **Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)**: Multi-tiered school-wide approach that creates positive behavior expectations. The approach focuses on teaching students social skills that all students can model (Musti-Rao & Haydon, 2011).

• **Professional Development**: Teacher efforts to bring about change in their classroom practice to support student success (Guskey, 2002).

**Summary**

Chapter One provided an overview of the purpose of this study on implementing BSP in the classroom to impact student engagement. The following chapter will provide the literature that relates to the use of BSP and studies that have been conducted utilizing the tool.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

One of the most important tasks as an educator is getting students engaged in curriculum and motivated to learn. If students are disinterested in the subject matter or have difficulty understanding it, they become frustrated and lose interest in the lesson. One classroom management tool that may help increase academic engagement is the use of BSP.

This literature review will define BSP, present the benefits of BSP, and provide the functions of two types of praise: praise for effort and praise for ability. We will explore student responses to BSP with respect to age, gender, and delivery as well as teacher perspectives on BSP. The impact professional development can have on teaching practices will also be examined. In conclusion, factors that contribute to student engagement in the classroom with respect to academic achievement and student-teacher relationships will be analyzed. This review will focus on the potential of BSP to improve student engagement at the elementary and middle school levels.

Defining Behavior-Specific Praise

Behavior-specific praise is a statement that recognizes a student’s desired behavior. The teacher delivers specific feedback on the behavior that was observed. An example of BSP is, “You included great details in your story. I look forward to reading more of them.” Examples of such behaviors include following class rules, completing assignments in a timely manner, participating in class discussions, and being on-task during a lesson.

Teachers providing students with praise that explicitly focuses on the desirable behaviors while also providing feedback about the students’ behavior or academic performance is encouraged. In a study performed by Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy (1979) as little as 5% of teacher praise given by first-grade teachers were behavior-specific. In order for praise to be
effective, not only should it be specific, but it should also follow the desired behavior (Brophy, 1981; Kohn, 1999; Partin et al., 2009; Simonsen, Myers, & DeLuca, 2010). In the case of differentiated instruction, students will respond positively if praise statements are thoughtful and meet their own personal needs (Partin et al., 2009). The use of BSP is more effective when it is individualized and connected with the underlying behaviors that lead to a desirable outcome.

Benefits of Praise

Praise can be advantageous in the classroom for multiple reasons. Praise can be used as a spontaneous reaction to a student’s accomplishment. Unplanned praise is more effective than planned praise, however, it may backfire if the teacher responds to the student behavior in a surprising manner (e.g., I can’t believe you actually did it.) rather than admiring their accomplishments (Brophy, 1981). Furthermore, praise could be used to bring attention to student progress (e.g., I knew that you could do it.), or a means of establishing teacher-student relationships (e.g., Those are nice looking shoes.). Verbal praise can become more effective if paired with nonverbal praise. It is rewarding and encouraging for a student to hear, “Great work!” followed with a physical gesture (i.e, thumbs up) rather than saying it without expression or other positive reinforcing action (Brophy, 1981). According to Brophy, praise can be used for other situations in addition to reinforcing proper behavior.

Praising students who model good behavior and work habits may also serve as a model for other students. This is reflected in Bandura’s Social Learning Theory which emphasizes the impact that modeling has on ‘observers’ to acquire appropriate behavior and/or performance (Bandura, 1977). Not all studies have found the use of praise to be beneficial, however. Praise has been known to be viewed as a form of control (Kohn, 1999; Saeverot, 2011). Additionally, intrinsic motivation can decline as a result of praise. When students continuously receive verbal
rewards, they often learn to rely on them (Brophy, 1981; Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 1999; Kohn 1999).

Students are to do as they are told without extrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1999; Saeverot, 2011). Although rewards can endlessly be given, they are impractical, too difficult to sustain. Rewards deter self-regulation. Extrinsic motivation impairs a person’s responsibility to motivate him or herself (Deci et al., 1999).

Praise can be counterproductive (Brophy, 1981; Chappuis, 2009; Kohn, 1999). Teachers who use strategies to instill motivation and engagement may result in teacher dependency (Kohn, 1999; Saeverot, 2011). Moreover, Kohn (1999) added that if a teacher’s objective is to seek long term quality performance, assist students to become self-directed learners, and develop good work ethics, then rewards are useless.

Different types of praise may cause students to be dependent on their teacher’s evaluation, as their performance is measured against the teacher’s expectations of what is worth praising (Kohn, 1999; Saeverot, 2011). Praise results in students struggling to meet the teacher’s expectations with the consequence that they are too teacher-dependent and less involved in self-efficacy and self-improvement.

Teachers fail to praise contingently. Furthermore, they often praise students for incorrect responses or work that does not meet their expectations. Praise is used to encourage students, not to reinforce the learning that is taking place (Brophy, 1981, Chappuis, 2009)). Although praise can be deemed as a positive reinforcement tool (Burnett, 2001), praise may be ineffective because it is being utilized inefficiently with students fixated on teacher-pleasing rather than self-gratification (Brophy, 1981; Kohn, 1999; Saeverot, 2011).
Functions of the Two Types of Behavior-Specific Praise: Effort and Ability

There are two types of behavior-specific praise: praise for effort and praise for ability. Praise for effort will be discussed first.

**Praise for effort.** Praise for effort involves acknowledging the students' attempts to behave appropriately or perform to the best of their ability. An example of praise for effort would be, “You worked very hard on completing the math test.”

A study was conducted with early adolescent children. Each student was given ten challenging problems from a nonverbal IQ test. Students were given praise for effort or praise for ability after the test was completed. Of the students praised for their effort, 90% of them requested another challenging task, while those praised for ability did not. Although many of the students failed the second task, those praised for their effort did not perceive themselves as failures. They viewed the failure as a need to apply more effort to the assigned task (Dweck, 2006). Fostering a classroom environment where challenges are embraced regardless of failure is one way to instill in students the benefits of meaningful work. Providing the proper type of praise is one way to accomplish this goal (Dweck, 2010). Research performed by Dweck indicated that praising students for their learning process – applications, strategies, and persistence – produces long term benefits more than telling them how smart they are at something. Despite being faced with failure, students that responded well to praise for effort maintained a positive view on learning reflective of the idea that trying new things can be rewarding.

Praise for effort may lead students to focus on the process of their work and the potential for improvement. If children are recognized for their hard work, they may associate it with effort (Chappuis, 2009; Mueller & Dweck, 1998).
Another study investigated praise for effort which involved 128 fifth graders. Students were asked to work on three sets of problems. They were given a number of experimental tasks which became increasingly difficult. Some students were given praise for their efforts (e.g., You must have worked hard on these problems.) and some for their ability (e.g., You must be smart.). Upon receiving the feedback, children were asked if they preferred to pursue a performance goal or a learning goal. Sixty-seven percent of children who received feedback for ability chose performance goals while a significantly higher number of children, 92%, who received feedback for effort chose learning goals. In this study, praise for effort influenced children to work towards improving their learning rather than their performance. Five additional studies were performed and concluded that praise for effort encourages students to work harder and face challenges easier than those praised for ability (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2007b; Mueller & Dweck 1998).

Praise should be given because students have succeeded at a task and have put forth the necessary effort to be successful (Brophy, 1981). Students should expend the effort into their academic performance without the expectations of rewards. Effort may be driven by an internal desire to succeed (i.e., intrinsic motivation); and not by the desire to receive a reward (i.e., extrinsic motivation) (Chappuis, 2009). Praise for effort can encourage students and motivate them to voluntarily work harder. This development of intrinsic motivation can be connected to the development of student character which Dewey describes in the following statement, “Establishing of character should be a comprehensive aim of school instruction and discipline” (Dewey, 1944, p. 346).

The major function of praise is to provide encouragement to students that have difficulty with their work as well as to support students of any academic level that lack self-confidence
(Brophy, 1981), however, praise for effort can be counterproductive (Brophy, 1981; Chappuis, 2009).

Brophy (1981) stated the following:

> Overemphasizing the expenditure of effort might show appreciation and make students feel good about one incident, but at the same time it implies that extraordinary effort will also be required to attain success on similar tasks in the future. That is, praise which implies that students succeeded only because of extraordinary effort also implies that their abilities on this type of task are limited. (p.276)

**Praise for ability.** Praising for ability involves acknowledging the students' ability on a given task and specifying what it is the student is doing correctly. An example of praising for ability is, “You are really great at multiplying double digit numbers.”

Two self-theories of intelligence (i.e., ability) were shared by Dweck and Master (2008); the entity theory and incremental theory. Students who believe in the entity theory (i.e., fixed mindset) are convinced that intelligence is unchangeable. In contrast, students who believe in the incremental theory (i.e., growth mindset) are convinced that intelligence can be changed (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck 2007a; Dweck, 2007b; Dweck & Master, 2008). Both theories have been equally favored, with about 40% of adults and children supporting the entity theory of intelligence; about 40% favoring the incremental theory, and 20% remaining undecided. Self-theories highly impact how students self-regulate. They can either foster a student’s efforts to be successful or halt their progress. In reference to Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs*, satisfying the *self-esteem needs* produces self-confidence, strength, capability, and adequacy. However, impeding these needs can result in inferiority and helplessness (Maslow, 1954).
In a fixed mindset, students are afraid to try because of the possibility of failure (Dweck, 1999; Dweck 2007a; Dweck, 2007b; Dweck & Master, 2008). Students with a fixed mindset are influenced by other people’s negative views of them, which this may disrupt their learning and motivation to succeed. Individuals with high self-efficacy willingly enter situations with greater self-confidence, while students with low self-efficacy are reluctant to perform a task due to the expectations of failure (Brophy, 1998; Pajares, 2008).

As mentioned in Dweck’s 2006 study which was shared in the Praising for Effort section of this paper, while praising for effort compelled students with a growth mindset to work harder, praising ability instilled a fixed mindset on other students, causing them to doubt their capabilities. Consequently, many of the students performed worse than when they started. Because of their insecurities, when asked to write their thoughts about the activity and include their test scores, many recorded inaccurate scores. Unfortunately, telling them they were smart or gifted, resulted in feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy making them feel worse about their abilities, and causing them to question their intelligence.

When students with a fixed mindset are not praised for their ability, they may be left with feelings of uncertainty, which interferes with performance. Viewing one’s own intelligence in a negative manner comes with costs (Dweck, 1999; Maclellan, 2005). Praising for ability can cause a student to feel incompetent when a task is not successfully achieved or a positive outcome is not reached. Mueller and Dweck (1998) also believed that praising ability has been known to play a critical role in the way children perceive their intelligence and motivation to be successful. Two views were posed on praising ability.

Praising ability can result in negative consequences for the student’s behavior and self-esteem. In reference to the study performed by Mueller and Dweck noted earlier in the Praising
for Effort section of this paper, 67% of the students chose performance goals; goals that had been linked to impaired performance and avoidance after failure. In summary, students who were praised for their ability were apprehensive to move forward after a failed experience, whereas students praised for their efforts were willing to pursue a challenging task.

Praising a student's ability resulted in a negative impact. Students should not be invested in labels (e.g., You're smart.) and believe that appearing to be intelligent contains more value than learning (Dweck, 1999; VanDeWeghe, 2003). If students learn to comprehend that intelligence is adaptable they will then realize that hard work pays off (VanDeWeghe, 2003). Likewise, Maclellan (2005) also supported that praising for ability generates a fixed view of one's intelligence whereas praising for effort generates a malleable view of intelligence. Praising students for their ability limits the students' flexibility with their learning.

**Student and Teacher Perspectives on Praise**

Student responses to praise are conditional on age, gender and the delivery of praise (i.e., privately or publicly). We will first explore student perspectives with respect to age.

**Responses to Specific Praise Based on Individual Factors**

**Age.** Young children perceive the relationship between effort and ability differently than older children (as cited in Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Nicholls, 1978; Schunk, 1983). Children do not characterize effort and ability as separate entities until third grade (as cited in Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Nicholls, 1978; as cited in Schunk, 1983). Schunk (1983) performed a study with third grade children participating in a subtraction competency program and discovered that children praised over several sessions for their ability displayed greater self-efficacy than children who were praised for their effort. In this study, children's self-efficacy could be validated if told they possessed the skills to perform the math task. Providing students
with positive reinforcement should deliver the message that they are competent and, with continued effort, have the capability to be successful.

In a separate study, Burnett and Mandell (2010) examined teachers’ and students’ perceptions of praise. Fifty-six students in grades 1-6 were interviewed to gather their perspective of praise and positive feedback. Students in grades 1-2 preferred to be praised for good behavior. Students in grade 3 preferred to be praised for getting their work done and trying their best. Fifth grade students preferred to be praised for achieving a goal and putting effort into their work. Students also continued to state that receiving praise made them motivated and proud of themselves.

**Gender.** Boys and girls respond to praise differently depending on the type of praise and how it is administered (Elwell & Tiberio, 1994; as cited in Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). In a study performed by Koestner, Zuckerman, and Koestner (as cited in Henderlong & Lepper, 2002), fifth and sixth grade students were assigned a hidden figure task and praised for either effort or ability. As they expected, competence, performance, and intrinsic motivation increased when boys were praised for their ability. The same qualities increased for the girls who received praise for effort.

**Delivery of praise.** The process in which praise is delivered can also impact student reactions to praise. Elwell and Tiberio (1994) conducted a study with 620 students in grades 7th-12th to assess their reactions to teacher praise. Of the participants, 279 were female and 341 were male. Participants were given the Praise Attitude Questionnaire (PAQ) which consisted of five questions based on student attitudes to teachers giving praise for academic work and two questions regarding conduct. Praise was highly-sought for academic work. The responses “all the time” and “praise loudly” were more frequent for students in grades 7 and 8, then it
decreased in grades 9 and 10, and increased again for grades 11 and 12. The answers "all the
time" or "praise loudly" were slightly higher from the boys than girls. In conclusion, students
across all grade levels favored praise both academically and behaviorally.

Based on the study by Burnett and Mandell (2010), teacher perspectives on BSP varied.
Five teachers were interviewed to gain their perspective of praise and positive feedback. Two
teachers felt that even if a child was capable academically, effort feedback should still be given
to encourage more challenging tasks. Another teacher felt that if students were only praised for
ability, many of them would never receive praise. Two teachers felt that they implement both
types of praise in their classroom.

**Impact of Professional Development**

Effectively implementing a positive behavior technique such as the use of BSP requires
time and willingness to broaden teaching practices. Professional development plays a vital role
in potentially improving not only student achievement but teacher practice. The most favorable
kind of professional development is one that involves assessment, observation, sharing,
reflecting, and collaboration (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Vescio, Ross, & Adams,
2007). While some teachers may find professional development to be unnecessary, other
teachers perceive it as a way to share useful strategies to make student learning successful.
Professional development programs focus on modifying the practice of classroom teachers,
seeking change in the learning outcomes of the students (Guskey, 2002). It is the belief that
professional development may strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in school by
providing teachers with the opportunities to expand their knowledge and skillset, thus improving
the effectiveness of their teaching (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey, 2002;
Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). “When schools support teachers with a well-designed and
rich professional development, those teachers are able to create the same types of rigorous and engaging opportunities for students - a foundation for student success in school and beyond” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p 50).

**Professional learning communities.** Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) allow for professional development on a greater scale involving various stakeholders committed to reaching a common goal. PLCs have the potential to change teacher practice and reconstruct student learning when a process is in place that make collaborating possible and effective (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Teachers actively involved in PLCs contribute to their existing teaching practices by providing opportunities to reinforce and sustain these skills. Engaging teachers in PLCs may strengthen their professional knowledge and continue to improve student learning (Vescio et al., 2007).

**Action research.** Various professional development programs exist. Action research is one program where teachers analyze their current practice, and seek ways to enhance and assess their teaching strategies (Feldman & Atkin, 1995; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Schmuck, 1997). This program is not intended for teachers to create a new teaching practice, but to apply the skills they have already acquired (Guskey, 2002). Teachers who participate in action research can place a positive impact on the future of teaching redefining the roles of an educator. To understand action research, however, teachers must be able to grasp research findings and utilize these findings. By performing action research, teachers have the ability to take lead in gathering insight essential to improving their teaching practice. In summary, teachers are not only implementing the ideas of others, but initiating educational change (Feldman & Atkin, 1995).
Factors Contributing to Student Engagement

Many contributing factors are associated with student success. When students are engaged with school they are more likely to learn, find school rewarding, and pursue higher education (Marks, 2000). High expectations of academic performance, effective teaching, professional learning communities, and positive learning environments are some of many components that influence student success. Students are more likely to be engaged in school with these types of supports available (Klem & Connell, 2004). The following sections will examine student engagement with respect to academic achievement, school and classroom environment, and student/teacher relationships.

Academic achievement. Students’ active engagement may reflect in their academic performance. Engagement in learning is equally important for success in school as it is necessary for the majority of traditional school systems (Klem & Connell, 2000). Researchers have discovered that student engagement is a steady predictor of both student behavior and academic achievement (Jones, 2009). Consequently, lack of student engagement may create a domino effect that may ultimately lead to negative school behavior with the possibility of dropping out of school (Steinberg, 1996).

A study was performed to explore the internal dynamics of engagement and disaffection and their effects on achievement using the self-system model of motivational development (SSMMD). Some of the dynamics included perceived control and teacher reactions to students’ engagement or lack of. Findings revealed that positive emotions drive children’s efforts to participate in academic tasks. Competence was another contributor to behavioral engagement and disaffection. Children displaying high levels of efficacy were likely to exert more effort and show improvement in class (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008). Children’s active
engagement in academic tasks is the intermediary between perceived control and substantial accomplishments (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

**Student/teacher relationships.** Establishing positive student/teacher relationships can be a determining factor in student engagement. For example, in a study with six elementary schools and three middle schools, researchers measured student engagement using the Research Assessment Package for Schools, Student Report (RAPS-S). The assessment was based on a four-point Likert-style scale, 1 being “not at all true” to 4 being “very true.” The RAPS-S measured engagement on two components based on the adjustment in school; Ongoing Engagement and Reaction to Challenge. Questions regarding Ongoing Engagement included how attentive students are in class, the amount of effort they exert in school, and how prepared they are for class. Questions regarding Reaction to Challenge included various ways students react or cope with negative school-related situations (Klem & Connell, 2011).

Of the students that received the assessment, 35% of elementary and 31% of middle school students were at risk levels on engagement suggesting disengagement from school. Twenty-seven percent of elementary and 14% of middle school students reached optimal levels. This suggested that students lose engagement as they progress through the various levels of school (Klem & Connell, 2004; Lopez, 2011; Marks, 2000; Skinner et al., 2008; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009). Known as the “engagement slide” (p. 72), the decline in disengagement may attribute to students receiving less praise as they age (Lopez, 2011). Elementary students were 89% more likely to sustain engagement when they received high levels of teacher support, however 73% felt disengaged from school when low levels of teacher support were present. Middle school students with high levels of teacher support were nearly three times more likely to have increased levels of engagement, whereas 68% of middle school
students were more likely to be disengaged when little teacher support was available (Klem & Connell, 2004). Additionally, an analysis was performed to examine the relationship between teachers' behavior and students' engagement. The study concluded that teacher involvement with students on an individual basis had profound impact on children's engagement and perceptions of the teacher (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Teacher support in this study has demonstrated the positive effects it can have on student engagement. Children who display more engagement in a task receive greater teacher support, however, disengaged children are more likely to experience teacher withdrawal (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Students who view teachers as establishing a caring, well-structured learning environment with clear and high expectations are more likely to be motivated to engage in school. Additionally, supportive interpersonal relationships with authority figures (e.g., teachers, coaches) in school result in more positive attitudes, satisfaction, and engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004; Musti-Rao & Haydon, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008, Skinner et al., 2009).

Summary

Chapter Two presented literature that provided various views of BSP, the impact of professional development on improved teaching practices, and the factors that contribute to positive student engagement. Chapter Three consists of the setting and participants of the action research study. Furthermore, the data sources and procedures that were taken to perform this study will also be shared.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

As stated in Chapter One, the intent of this study was to determine whether using behavior-specific praise would increase student engagement and impact class participation. In this section, I will describe the methods I used to gather and analyze data to answer the questions I proposed, which included the following:

1. What is the impact of using frequent, behavior-specific praise with my third grade students with respect to increasing student engagement, as defined by frequency of class participation?

2. In what ways will increasing the amount of praise I give to my students affect my professional development as a teacher?

Research Design

I used a practical action research design because I wanted to assess and improve my own teaching practice. Action research is designed for teachers who would like to improve their teaching practice through student observations, patterns in student behavior, and thus reflecting on any changes in respect to the study. Data collected from action research can result in improvements in the classroom as well as in the school during and after the research. Additionally, it allows the teacher-researcher to be self-critical in the process by gaining student insight of the study (Schmuck, 1997). Practical action research is intended to inform and guide instruction in a local practice which may impact larger issues (i.e., changes across grade level or school level). Teachers who seek positive change in the classroom must become active participants in the classroom and conscientious observers of the learning process.
The research questions were addressed using both qualitative and quantitative methods (i.e., video-taped lessons, audio-taped interviews, reflective teaching journal, observational checklist, and surveys). Student responses from the Student Engagement Survey, the number of times students raised their hands, and the frequency I awarded praise were aggregated and graphed. The data collected focused primarily on the frequency the focal students raised their hands and their behavior towards my use of BSP. Additionally, the study served as a self-reflection of effective teacher practice.

Site

Sierra Elementary School\(^1\) in central California is one of twelve elementary schools in its district. Approximately 420 students are enrolled in the school. Sierra Elementary School serves primarily children of parents who are in the military. The parents of these children attend the Naval Postgraduate School. Of the overall student population, 88% of parents have attended college and 78% possess bachelor’s or advanced degrees. Eighteen percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (i.e., families earning less than $41,348 a year based on a family of four). The school serves 420 students consisting of 55% White, 18% Asian-American/Pacific Islander, 17% Hispanic/Latino, and 4% African-American. Additional ethnic categories include “two or more races” and “decline to state.” Approximately 15% of the school’s student population is from another country. Twenty-one percent of the students are considered ELLs with 35% speaking Spanish, 6% speaking Filipino/Tagalog, 5% speaking Korean, 1% speaking Cantonese, and 53% speaking other languages.

The average class size varies by grade level: 23 in kindergarten, 26 in first grade, 28 in second grade, 27 in third grade, 26 in fourth grade, and 31 in fifth grade. There is 1 second/third-grade combination teacher with 12 second graders and 14 third graders.

\(^1\) School and student names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
Sierra Elementary School has four kindergarten teachers, three first grade teachers, three second grade teachers, and two teachers per grade level in grades 3rd, 4th, and 5th. There are 24 members on the teaching staff including Special Education, Science, Music, and P.E. teachers, and all but two are European-American; 22 of the 23 on the teaching staff are females. In addition, administration and other faculty are female and European-American.

The class in which the research project was conducted was in a third-grade class that included 27 students, 11 of whom are boys and 16 of whom are girls. Ten of the students are European-American, two are African-American, one is Hispanic, four are Asian-American, two are Greek, one is Brazilian, three are of middle-eastern descent, and four are biracial. Of the 27 students, eight are ELLs. The primary languages of the ELLs include Arabic, Nepali, Greek, Malay, Portuguese, and German. Two European-American students and one biracial student receive special education services. Sixteen of the twenty-seven students perform at proficient or advance levels.

Participants
The study was performed with the whole class including four focal students performing at and below grade level.

Participant 1. Karoline is seven-years-old and is an ELL whose primary language is Greek. She has a twin brother and this is the first time they have been placed in the same class. Mom has communicated that although capable, Karoline is unmotivated and only participates when called on and engages in peer interaction when prompted. She performs at the minimum level on class assignments. Not only does her twin brother display more motivation in class activities, he naturally excels in all academic areas. Karoline does not feel the least bit compelled to compete with her brother. As her mom volunteers in the classroom, she has seen some
improvement with Karoline’s on-task behavior and engagement in class activities, though she is hopeful to see continued improvement. Karoline gets bored and distracted easily and tunes out, turning to distractions such as drawing and playing with her personal supplies at her desk.

**Participant 2.** Elvin is an eight-year-old biracial student (Hispanic and European-American) who is nice to others and quiet, however, he struggles with communicating his thoughts and tends to daydream often. He attends speech class twice a week for 30 minutes. Although he performs at grade level, it is challenging for Elvin to articulate his thoughts clearly and smoothly. Per the speech therapist’s request, Elvin is permitted to use his whiteboard to record his thoughts when speaking becomes too difficult for him. In addition, Elvin’s extent of class participation and engagement is minimal.

**Participant 3.** Brenda is an eight-year-old Asian-American girl who is comical yet soft-spoken. Her academic performance is at grade level. Brenda is unmotivated to participate in class discussions. She spends much of her time speaking with her group members or fidgeting with her personal school supplies. Brenda requires redirection and is frequently asked to display “active listening.” In addition, Brenda has a difficult time communicating her thoughts aloud. When she volunteers to share out an answer, she is unable to give her response or shares two or three words at a time. A parent conference was held to discuss this matter and one recommendation was to allow Brenda to write down either her responses or key words to avoid the “stall” time when she is selected to share a response.

**Participant 4.** Sienna is an eight-year old European-American girl who is well-mannered and enthusiastic. She appears to enjoy school, but lacks the motivation to participate often whether whole class or small group. Her academic performance is below grade level in language arts and slightly below grade level in math. Sienna is unmotivated to voluntarily
answer questions. When called upon using equity sticks, often times she is unsure about the question that was asked. Furthermore, she requires prompting to work with her group to seek an answer to a problem.

**Teacher.** Since I used action research, this study involved me in the role of the 3rd grade teacher and data collector.

I am a Filipina with 10 years teaching experience all of which have been in the 3rd grade. I have an associate’s degree in Liberal Arts and a bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies. Much of my student engagement strategies have been based either on a reward system of some sort (e.g., tickets, group points, school “money”) or the traditional frequent reminders to stay on task, using proximity, or quietly tapping desks. I recently began participating in a school-wide positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) system and selected three of my most distracted students to be placed on this plan. Their on-task behavior is recorded throughout the day and is based on a point system. The plan goes home daily indicating the number of points the child received that day and comments from me. The administrator and school intervention teacher record the points at the end of each school day and track the student progress on a graph.

**Data Collection Procedures**

This section addresses the procedures that took place during the intervention of implementing the use of behavior specific praise in the third-grade classroom.

**Intervention.** The intervention consisted of implementing the use of BSP to all the students in the third grade classroom during math instructional time over the course of one month. Whole class participation took place, with the four aforementioned students being the primary focus. The focal students were video-recorded three times a week to allow me to review
and observe in detail their behavior when they were asked to work independently and in collaborative groups.

**Data Collection and Sources**

Multiple data instruments were used including a School Engagement Survey, an observational checklist, a reflective teaching journal, and student interviews.

**Implementation.** Prior to the study, I created an observational checklist to record my observations from the video recording (see Appendix A). The chart was divided into sections to include the following: names of the four focal students, number of times the students raised their hands, student behavior/responses to praise (e.g., peer interaction, behavior during independent work time), and the frequency I awarded praise. There was also a section to record the behavior of other students and the number of times I gave them BSP. Three of my focal students were strategically arranged in one collaborative group closest to the front of the room.

The study began with a Student Engagement Survey (see Appendix B). A 14-item Likert-style questionnaire was distributed to the whole class. Possible responses ranged from “very true” to “not at all true”. Questions were read aloud and clarified when asked. Over the one-month period, I video-recorded the four focal students during my math lessons. Behavior-specific praise was awarded to all students throughout the math lessons dependent upon class participation (e.g., sharing responses aloud, peer collaboration) and student engagement (e.g., eye contact, books opened to the correct page). Unfortunately, Brenda was not permitted to be videotaped which required me to manually keep track of her behavior, the number of times she raised her hand, and how often I awarded her praise. The videos were reviewed at the end of each week. When reviewing the recordings, I used an observational checklist to track the number of times students raised their hands, the number of times I awarded praise, and the behavior
exhibited during instructional time (e.g., worked productively at their seats, used materials as asked, followed teacher directions). The observational checklist was used to record my observations of the four focal students as well as overall class behavior and how frequently I awarded praise to additional students. A new observation checklist was used daily. All results were analyzed, tabulated, and presented on graphs.

In order to self-reflect on my teaching, a reflective teaching journal was maintained to record my observations of student behavior and additional thoughts on my students’ engagement and participation. It also allowed me to think about how often I was giving praise and record their reactions when receiving it.

At the end of the month-long study, all students were given the Student Engagement Survey again. This allowed me to compare students’ perceptions of their own engagement levels both before my implementation of praise, and after a month of experiencing the praise.

The week following the study’s end, to further explore the impact of specific praise on student engagement, audio-taped interviews were conducted individually with focal students during the lunch period. Questions were open-ended to allow for deeper discussion (see Appendix C). The interviews also allowed for informal conversations with the students, which provided me with a richer source of information about the effect of my study on the students. Interviews were transcribed and can be found in Chapter 4.
### Data Analysis Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the impact of using frequent, behavior-specific praise with my third-grade students with respect to increasing student engagement, as defined by frequency of class participation?</td>
<td>• Student Engagement Survey</td>
<td>• Graphed student responses (whole class and focal students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Video recorder</td>
<td>• Observed frequency I awarded praise</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observational checklist</td>
<td>• Observed frequency students raised their hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews</td>
<td>• Observed student behavior/class participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recorded student behavior exhibited/reviewed for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recorded frequency of praise awarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Tracked amount of times students raised their hands</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recorded student behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reviewed data for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Compared/contrasted student responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways will increasing the amount of praise I give to my students affect my professional development as a teacher?</td>
<td>• Reflective teaching journal</td>
<td>• Reviewed entries for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observational Checklist</td>
<td>• Recorded frequency of praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews</td>
<td>• Tracked amount of times students raised their hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• Recorded student behavior</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Compared/contrasted student responses</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Summary

This chapter provided the details of where the study took place, description of the participants, and description of the data collection and instruments. By using a practical action
research approach, I was able to assess and reflect on my own teaching practice. The next chapter will analyze and interpret the findings of the use of BSP and its impact on student engagement and class participation.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of my practical action research study focused on the following research questions: 1). What is the impact of using frequent, behavior-specific praise with respect to increasing engagement as defined by frequency of class participation? 2). In what ways will increasing the amount of praise I give to my students affect my professional development as a teacher?

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected (i.e., video-taped lessons, audio-taped interviews, reflective teaching journal, observational checklist, and a Student Engagement Survey) to cross validate the data. After analyzing my data sources, five themes emerged. The following three themes derived from my first research question:

- Students acquired perseverance and confidence when awarded behavior-specific praise.
- Students took initiative to exceed teacher expectations and utilized own strategies to maximize learning.
- The use of behavior-specific praise strengthened peer communication.

The following two themes derived from my second research question:

- Increasing the amount of praise I gave to my students influenced the learning environment allowing students to facilitate their own learning.
- Giving behavior-specific praise resulted in valuable student feedback necessary in order for me to implement this process long term.
The impact of using frequent BSP to increase engagement. The use of BSP increased the engagement of my four focal students and whole class as it was evident through the observational checklist, reflective teaching journal, survey, and individual interviews.

Perseverance and confidence. Awarding BSP heightened perseverance and self-confidence in my students. Students that do not usually contribute to class discussion or confidently participate in activities were noticed actively taking part in the lessons. In one math lesson, the focus was the ability to find equivalent fractions as well as reducing them to simplest form. Typically, many of the students that already struggle with math concepts depend on their peers to provide answers rather than attempting the work independently. As praise was distributed, however, students were witnessed actively trying to reach an answer. This was evident when I asked the class to show me their whiteboards and Sienna commented, “Wait, I’m almost done!” as she scribbled down her thoughts, hastily wiping her errors with the palm of her hand before finally raising her board. Eager to solve the problem entirely before she revealed her answer, she smiled and sighed with relief. Elvin and Karoline displayed similar behavior. Elvin requires more time than most of my students to complete tasks. Elvin’s performance was influenced by the praise as demonstrated in the following vignette:

I was walking around the classroom. I told the class that I wanted to begin seeing their whiteboards. Elvin was in the middle of completing the work. “Elvin, I like how you are still focused on getting the work done. Take your time and you can show me your answer once you’re finished.” While students began the next problem, Elvin finally finished and showed me his board with the correct answer. I expressed acknowledgement with, “Thank you for taking your time. Your answer is correct!” He immediately erased his board and proceeded to work on the next problem (observational checklist, 2/5/14).
This type of behavior from Elvin is not common (see Chapter 3). Elvin's daydreams often cause him to anxiously try and catch up. A shift in motivation to participate was evident based on their responses to teacher feedback (i.e., Thank you, Elvin, for continuing to work on the problem.). Elvin was found looking to his group and the front board to ensure he was on task. He was focused more on his work and utilized others around him to receive support.

A change in posture was also indicative of student engagement as demonstrated in the following: Each time praise was being given throughout the class, students sat up in their seats, whiteboard materials in hand, working effortlessly to seek answers. Moving their bodies side to side, students used their peers as resources. As students found collaborative answers, some jumped up and down in their seats, some even stood up with their hands waving around, as I yelled, “Oh, table 1 has an answer, table 3 has an answer, tables 1 and 5 are still working it out. Thank you for continuing to work the problem out. I like how everyone is working together as teams” (observational checklist, multiple days).

Students also demonstrated confidence as revealed in students' responses to my interview questions. Table 1 below reveals the similarities in responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Students' Responses to Interview Question 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> Did the praise make you work harder and/or more willing to participate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karoline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sienna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three out of the four focal students stated that the praise made them work harder. Sienna felt the praise encouraged her to participate more and pay attention. When reflecting on the
School Engagement Survey (see Figure 1), whole class perceptions also changed after distributing BSP.

**Figure 1** Whole class response pre and post intervention from School Engagement Survey

Of the fourteen questions on the survey, I graphed the responses that generated the most significant results. In reference to Question 2 *When I'm in class, I participate in class discussions*, eight students replied “very true” in the pre-intervention and it increased to 19 students in the post-intervention. In reference to Question 4 *I pay attention in class*, five students answered “sort of true” in the pre-intervention and it increased to nine students in the post-intervention survey. Results of the remaining questions are explained later in this chapter.
Analysis of my reflective teaching journal, the 5\textsuperscript{th} day into my study revealed that after I had been praising the students as they were on task and displaying appropriate behavior, many of the students were beginning to complete the work without the praise. In that instance, I began to question if the intrinsic motivation could be a result of the extrinsic praise. Karoline, for example, kept coming up in my journal entries, and how she maintained engaged throughout the entire study. She did not require the constant praise as it was evident in my observational checklist. With less praise on some days, Karoline continued to raise her hand (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2* Frequency of focal students raising their hands throughout study.

Karoline and Sienna appeared to participate the most (see Figure 2), with Sienna raising her hand the majority of the study. Brenda did not participate in the study until the third day. Per parents’ request, she was not allowed to be video-taped so I made the decision to leave her out of the study. After the second day, Brenda was added but her behavior and participation was tracked manually.
Day 4 was a continuation of equivalent fractions and all students were greatly involved in the lesson using their fraction bars and multiplication and division skills. Karoline and Sienna were the most motivated and involved in the class activities. Day 6 was a combination of all the skills taught on fractions and the ability to find patterns in order to solve problems. This was the last section in the chapter which is typically the hardest section of each chapter. Elvin was absent on this day. The other three focal students eagerly completed the problems on their whiteboards wanting to share out their answers.

Area and perimeter were introduced on Days 8 and 10. On Day 8, Eli preferred to do most of the work independently while his group, including Sienna and Karoline, collaborated. While his peers raised their hands, he quietly yet carefully worked the problems out on his board. Although not raising his hand, he was engaged in his own way. Brenda, on the other hand, appeared to be confused trying to comprehend the skill. She quietly worked the problems out, but once we started to complete perimeter problems as a class, she became more comfortable yet preferred to share her thoughts within her group. On Day 10, Karoline actively participated in class discussion. When asked to compare answers within groups, she compared with her brother and wanted to share her answers aloud. In addition, Karoline collaborated with Sienna. Brenda grew more comfortable attempting to ask and answer questions. Elvin continued to quietly work on his board. He had stepped out to use the restroom and upon his return, it took a while for him to get restarted.

Day 12 started off with correcting math homework on volume from the night before. Students traded papers within their groups. Students raised their hands if they wanted to volunteer answers. The remainder of the time, we continued working on volume. As stated in my notes, students continued to be engaged, with the exception of Elvin momentarily shutting down
The impact of behavior specific praise on student engagement

When Karoline’s brother took linker blocks from his desk. As discussed, teacher praise altered student behavior. As displayed on the graph, the number of times the focal students raised their hands were consistently high until the middle of the study. I believe that they began to decrease due to more group interaction being encouraged and because I began selecting non-focal students to answer questions. The focal students being the main participants of my study, I purposely kept selecting them in the beginning but gradually began randomly calling other students to share out answers and comments to make participation more equitable.

A shift of confidence was apparent with the use of BSP as described in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Focal Students’ Responses to Interview Questions 1 and 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>when I praised you for what you were doing during math time, how did that make you feel?</td>
<td>• I felt very happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel you have been participating more? Why?</td>
<td>• I think yes. [smiling and wiggling in her seat] You help me with my questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karoline</td>
<td>• It made me feel a little special.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• [No eye contact] I get really interested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvin</td>
<td>• I’m proud because I’m part of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• [Propped up in her seat, smiled, tapped the side of her head] I’m a little bit smarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>• Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Because I knew some of the questions from second grade.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These students shared different reasons why they felt they were participating more, yet they all shared positive feelings they felt after receiving BSP. The positive outcomes as a result
THE IMPACT OF BEHAVIOR SPECIFIC PRAISE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

of implementing BSP, are apparent in their interview responses. The feelings of special, happy, and proud, reveal the impact BSP can have on a student's self-image and actions.

The increased confidence displayed by the students can be seen throughout the study. In this one-month study, Karoline developed more confidence. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Karoline was known to require regular prompting to get assignments done and engage in peer interaction. Contrastingly, her twin brother possessed opposite qualities, voluntarily participating and completing work in a timely manner. During the study, however, as I observed and reviewed the video tapes, Karoline's brother began displaying behavior not common to him; performing poorly, off-task, and requiring frequent prompting. Never having done this before, I placed them in the same collaborative group hoping for a positive change in behavior. Because Karoline was praised so often for the appropriate work habits, effort, and behavior, she developed the confidence to assist her brother. His off-task behavior gave her the opportunity to reteach the material to her brother and keep him on-task. Confident with her work, Karoline would walk over to his desk to check his work and explain her answers. Karoline's mother was pleased, but at the same time concerned with the role reversal. As I watched Karoline help her brother on a daily basis, she was commended for her deeds with statements including, "Thank you for taking the time to help your brother. I didn't even have to ask you." There were many instances where Karoline took it upon herself to support her brother without the expectation of praise.

Brenda, one of the focal students, gained more confidence with the support of BSP. Prior to the study, Brenda, rarely stayed on task and interacted with her peers (see Chapter 3). As Brenda received BSP for her work habits, she began to collaborate more with her peers. Her confidence continued to improve when an ELL joined her table. As written in my reflective teaching journal, "Rather than take a 'back seat,' Brenda is taking on a leadership role. Giving
praise has encouraged her to push her capabilities even further.” With the student knowing very little English, Brenda gathered the confidence to be her teacher. Brenda received BSP for “taking the time to help Sammie,” “sitting beside her and pointing to pictures,” and “helping her read the problems.” Within a full week, it was an established norm for Brenda not only to help this student, but to confidently explain her answers to Sammie and take charge even without reminders. Brenda was seen explaining her board work to Sammie as Sammie looked on. Brenda received occasional praise statements including, “I really appreciate you taking the time to help Sammie even without me telling you. Thank you. She appreciates your help, too.”

One of the more significant examples of confidence involved Sienna. During a unit on area, students were given a story problem on a dog fence. As I monitored the classroom, I had awarded praise for those that were reading the problem out loud and taking it in parts, and for those using their whiteboards to draw a picture or write a number sentence. I reminded the students that although it was a difficult question, I wanted to see if they could solve it on their own before comparing with their peer group. My normal group expectations include reaching a consensus before revealing an answer. As I walked around the room, conversations were relevant and students were preparing to share their answers. I noticed Sienna was in deep thought as she tried several strategies to reach an answer. Kneeling beside her desk, I tapped her whiteboard and responded with, “I like your idea of trying different ways to find the answer and checking to see if they make sense with the question.” Quietly continuing her quest to find an answer, she responded with a smile. Sienna’s self-confidence was evident as presented in this vignette:

When it was finally time for groups to show me their boards, all responses were identical until I reached Sienna’s table. When her group members held up their whiteboards, all boards had the same answer except for Sienna. My response was,
"Oh, you don’t have the same answer. Did you all explain your answers to each other?" Arguably, the group answered with, “Yes, but Sienna won’t change her answer.” The entire class said she was incorrect, but she confidently replied, “That’s wrong” (referring to the rest of the class). She explained her reasoning with the class still in disagreement. Before revealing the answer, I told Sienna, “I’m impressed with your confidence and choice to stick with your answer.” Then I proceeded to state, “Class, Sienna is correct!” She confidently came up to the class and explained her answer, receiving a raffle ticket for her grand explanation both verbally and visually (reflective teaching journal, 2/19/14).

Sienna, who was described in Chapter 3 as unmotivated to participate in class, gained confidence to stick with her answer without hesitation. Sienna was not praised for her answer, but rather for her thought process. Her confidence increased tremendously when she realized she was the only student in the class with the correct answer. I praised her for, “not doubting her answer.” She felt empowered especially when she was asked to explain her answer to the front of the class. She gladly and confidently accepted. In addition to viewing the video of this day, I also continued to share my thoughts on this experience in my reflective teaching journal sharing how it made me realize the importance of recognizing a student’s efforts, even when they least expect it. Sienna’s actions proved to me how influential teacher praise can be.

Half the battle of getting students to expend effort in their assignments is ensuring they have acquired self-confidence. Behavior-specific praise aided in the confidence of Karoline, Elvin, Brenda, and Sienna convincing them that effort and work habits offered a starting point in being academically successful.
A child’s self-efficacy plays a critical role in the amount of effort he or she is willing to expend. This finding indicates that by giving teacher praise, positive self-confidence was pushed to the forefront as students productively worked, whether individually or collaboratively. Moreover, BSP provided students with the awareness that with dedication, positive outcomes are achievable.

**Initiative.** Students took initiative to exceed teacher expectations and utilized own strategies to maximize learning. As I reviewed the video tapes and reflective teaching journal, I discovered that many of my students did more than required as praise was distributed. It was interesting to see the effect of praising one student for specific behavior and how easily it influenced other students to do the same. During one of the fraction lessons, students were given a fraction they had to reduce to simplest form. They were only required to write the fraction in simplest form. Karoline and Brenda pulled out their fraction bars and spread them on their desks. Karoline recorded her answer in numbers and words. Each problem that was displayed, Karoline immediately began solving. I publicly announced, “Great job, Karoline, for getting started right away.” She smiled and continued to work out the problem. Elvin and Sienna referred to the math wall for strategies to find simplest form. As I praised them for “utilizing their resources, using fraction strips, the math charts, and textbooks,” the more other students quickly began doing the same thing. Walking around the room, I awarded praise for the positive work habits I witnessed. “Wow, John even drew a picture of the fractions,” “Sandy used division to find simplest form,” “Bobby has both on his board. Great work, Bobby.” Soon after, the majority of the class included some type of explanation as to how they came up with their answers.
By students modeling appropriate behavior and receiving praise for the desired behavior, other students began to feel inclined to imitate the same actions. The students positively reacted to the teacher praise. Modeling resulted in persuading others to be on task, alleviating the time to redirect off-task behavior.

Positive responses were given by Elvin when asked about his feelings towards BSP as demonstrated in the following conversation:

Teacher: What is it about the praise that made you feel special rather than me just saying, “Great,” or “Good job?”

Elvin: When you say stuff to people, others will want to participate.

Teacher: Do you think that when I praised somebody else, it made you want to do the same thing?

Elvin: Yes.

Sienna was one that took initiative in many instances. Throughout the study, I noticed in my reflective teaching journal and note taking from the video, Sienna took on a leadership role in several activities dominating the group conversation. During an activity on perimeter, they were given a figure in which the perimeter had to be found. Sienna instantly began drawing the figure. My response to her actions was, “Good idea, Sienna, drawing the figure. It will make it easier for you to find the perimeter.” The students were reminded that they would be comparing their answers with their group. After noticing her group was ready, Sienna immediately said, “Okay, is everybody done?” She was the first student at her table to reveal her answer as she explained it. Similar behavior was exhibited during a fraction activity. Students were assigned a fraction number sentence. They were asked to reduce the sum to simplest form. As soon as I gave instructions, Sienna propped up in her chair, gathered her whiteboard materials, and announced
to her group, “Okay, so we have to change the answer to simplest form.” She referred to the board several times to reread the problem out loud to her group. In addition to the answer, I told the students I wanted the entire number sentence and the division work shown on their boards. Sienna was the first student to follow the directions. “Wow, thank you Sienna for following all of my directions.” She smiled and sunk in her chair as I praised her, using her board as an example.

Sienna, who, prior to the study, displayed inconsistent work habits, has shown improvement in her willingness to participate. As stated in Chapter 3, Sienna rarely raised her hand and if she was selected involuntarily to share an answer, in most cases, she did not know what the question was. Behavior-specific praise has made her a diligent worker as apparent in her actions. Based on my observational checklist (see Figure 2), she had her hand raised most of the time out of the focal students. Even when selected involuntarily, she was always prepared with an answer, and most of the time, her answers were correct.

This finding indicates that initiative can promote a positive learning experience for the students that take action. Students who readily take action may not only strengthen their understanding of the content, but it may motivate them or others to push beyond their comfort zone.

Behavior-specific praise led many students to take initiative in their class work, some more than others. When students are acknowledged for their efforts, big or small, that may make all the difference in how engaged they are on an assigned task. Behavior-specific praise increased the motivation in the students to utilize their resources, promote conversation, and seek help from peers.

**Strengthened peer communication.** The use of BSP strengthened peer communication as demonstrated in the following math lesson. It was a review day on equivalent fractions. A test
was coming up and I felt that the students could use review on the concept since some students continued to struggle with the skill. The observation checklist and reflective teaching journal entry on this day captured the students willingly communicating with their peers to seek answers as demonstrated in the following vignette:

I could already tell they were becoming engaged once I provided them with current and new strategies to find equivalent fractions (i.e., division, multiplication, individual fraction bars, fraction sheet, teacher overhead fraction strips). I could see an increase in motivation and student engagement when I encouraged group interaction. The more I praised each specific behavior (i.e., “Great idea for Tara and Matthew to decide to work together and they aren’t even in the same group! Oh, I like how Karla is using her fraction bars to find an equivalent fraction and now she’s using multiplication to check her work. Karla, it would be great if you compared it with your neighbor. I hear Sienna sharing out her answer with her group.”) the more other students modeled the same behavior interacting with their peers. Although I was praising quite frequently, the class interaction was too loud for the praise to be heard on the video (reflective teaching journal and observational checklist, 1/31/14).

Similar peer communication took place when working on volume. To enhance student understanding, trays of linker cubes were passed out per group. Students were shown one figure at a time, and they were asked to build the figure and write a number sentence that explained the volume of each figure. As soon as I announced that they would be working within their groups, Elvin immediately raised his hand to ask if he could work with the new student who was an ELL. Once students built their figures and wrote their number sentence on their whiteboards, I selected certain groups at a time to show me their boards.
When viewing the video, all students were engaged, constructing figures and writing number sentences. When asked to show me their boards, pairs were enthusiastically holding up both of their boards side by side with parts of the answer on each board. Some pairs were even seen discussing what part of the figure they were going to construct so they could put their pieces together. When I praised them for “working together by writing part of the answer on each board,” others began to do the same thing. As I monitored discussion, I witnessed peer collaboration, students correcting each other, and explaining answers. Again, I noted in my reflective teaching journal, *It was a really good day. Kids were so engaged that it was even hard to hear my praise. It was on-task noise* (reflective teaching journal, 2/20/14).

An increase in student engagement over the one-month duration of the study was also evident in the School Engagement Survey (see Figure 1). Question 9 of the survey stated *When we work on something in class, I feel interested.* Five students answered “sort of true” before the study began and it increased to 10 students after the study. Question 12 stated *I work on my class work because it’s interesting.* Seven students answered “very true” which increased to 14 students after the study. Paired with engaging materials (e.g., linker cubes, fraction bars, whiteboards) BSP only strengthened their on-task behavior and communication with one another.

Elvin does not usually prefer to work with others, and for him to take the initiative to ask if he could work with the new student, was an accomplishment for him. Elvin gets along with all of his peers, but never displays enthusiasm when asked to work with others. Throughout the activity, he was focused on the task, communicating with his partner, while physically turning the figure around as he spoke. Brenda, as she began getting used to working with Sammie, invited Ana, another ELL from her group, to join them. Brenda had developed a peer-tutoring
group making Sammie as well as Ana feel more confident in participating. Karoline picked up her chair and placed it beside her brother, whereas Sienna worked on the figure independently but interacted with her whole group once she found an answer.

Behavior-specific praise encouraged students to actively work together and it fostered stronger interpersonal relationships. Because students were randomly selected to share answers, peer communication promoted active listening and accountability. As evident in the examples provided, BSP increased motivation in the students to take part in the math assignment, while at the same time, enjoy doing it.

**Praise and its effects on my professional development as a teacher.** Utilizing BSP in the classroom affected my growth as a teacher by modifying my practice and how my classroom functioned, both in positive ways. Findings were evident through the individual interviews with the focal students and their feedback in response to the praise given.

**Praise influencing the learning environment.** Giving BSP has influenced my classroom learning environment allowing students to facilitate their own learning. After reviewing all of my data sources, I found little to no evidence of me providing continuous help to students. Alongside BSP, I continually referred struggling students to their group members. As group members were praised for “being on the right track,” “utilizing their resources,” and “comparing with their peers,” this convinced the struggling students to take advantage of the resources around them. The more specific praise they heard, the faster they sought support.

In several of the entries on my observational checklist, a recurring pattern is the frequency with which students were using their textbooks, handouts, the math wall, referring to the board to reread the problem, and peers to seek support. In addition, I can be found in the videos monitoring the classroom listening to conversations. Rarely was I found working one on
one with students. The following vignette is an example of students facilitating their own learning:

In one observation, Sienna was working on a perimeter problem and she did appear to have difficulty solving it. As I walked by her group, Karoline raised her hand requesting help with the same problem. Sienna quickly intervened and said, “Wait, let me finish and then I can explain it to you.” Sienna asked if I could check her answer so I asked her to explain the entire problem to me. In the end I asked, “Does that answer make sense with what the question is asking?” She smiled and answered with a yes. I replied with a smile and said, “You do such a good job explaining your reasoning! Thank you for explaining it to Karoline,” as I proceeded to monitor the classroom (observational checklist, 2/11/14).

In another group, I witnessed one of my two advanced students in heavy discussion about a math problem. One grew very frustrated because she really wanted to get it on her own. “Wait, don’t tell me yet! Let me try it again!” was her response to the other student who was trying to help her. To no avail, she finally gave in, and as her peer went through each step, she kept comparing her whiteboard to his. “Oh...okay! That’s how you got it. I skipped a step.” She erased some of her work trying to figure out what she left out.

Praising and encouraging my students for their efforts without reminders, gave them a sense of confidence and independence. The more they were praised, the more motivated they were to work without teacher assistance. When given clear expectations, students can facilitate their own learning, giving them the opportunity to teach and learn from each other. Students can gain a richer academic experience when given ample opportunities to collaborate and share their ideas as opposed to teachers providing regimented traditional teacher instruction.
As presented, BSP increased the motivation in my students to be self-directed learners, which resulted in increased participation as they grew eager to teach each other. Close teacher-student relationships may increase students' desires to become responsible, self-directed participants in the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Regardless of what academic levels the students were at, as demonstrated, everyone benefitted from working together without my help. Paired with BSP, students became empowered to share their knowledge with one another, as I just became the observer.

**Student feedback.** Giving BSP resulted in valuable student feedback necessary in order for me to implement this process long term. These responses to Question 4 can be found in Table 3 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Students' Responses to Interview Question 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> Can you think of a positive praise statement that I told you that made you want to keep working?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Karoline</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elvin</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brenda</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sienna</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These comments helped me to evaluate my teaching. It was powerful to hear the students' voices and to realize that the statements were encouraging enough for them to remember the specific statements. Brenda shared an exact statement that I said to her. The focal students articulated very clearly some statements that motivated them to continue working.
To elicit additional responses in regards to praise, individual questions were asked to each focal student as seen in Table 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional Interview Questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question: Do you think it makes a difference when I say your name and what you’re doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karoline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question: Did you like when I praised you out loud or privately?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question: What was different with how I praised you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karoline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question: Even if you’re trying, do you think it’s still important for me to tell you I like how you’re trying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karoline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students are saying that they want to hear specific comments from me. For example, Karoline’s response, “I like when you say exactly what I’m doing,” tells me that Karoline appreciated a comment from me that addressed specifically the particular behavior I was recognizing.

As I continued to review the interview questions, their individual feedback made me realize how motivation varies student to student. When interviewing Elvin, Sienna, and Brenda, they were presented with the question, Do you think that if I didn’t praise you, you’d put in less effort? Elvin stated, “I just think I would do it without the praise.” Sienna said if she wasn’t
praised as much, she would do a “tiny bit less.” Based on their responses, these students operate well through extrinsic motivation. Coincidentally, I did not ask Karoline the same question, however, from her actions, it is evident that she was becoming intrinsically motivated. In the beginning of the study, BSP helped her escape distractions and lack of motivation. Noticeable in my observational checklist (see Figure 2), Karoline continued to participate (i.e., hand raised, peer interaction) without the consistent praise. Post study, Karoline’s behavior and diligence has remained the same.

Combined with interactive opportunities (i.e., students coming up to the board to solve and explain problems), behavior-specific praise likely contributed to the change in student responses on the School Engagement Survey (see Figure 1). In reference to Question 8 *When I’m in class, I think about other things*, thirteen students answered “not very true” in the pre-intervention and decreased to 7 students in the post-intervention. Behavior-specific praise also affected the changes in student responses from Questions 9 and 12, both pertaining to student interest of academic material (See p. 48).

Giving BSP raised my awareness of the importance of recognizing a student’s positive actions and how it heavily influences their decision to continue displaying positive behavior. Student feedback via interviews was the most valuable feedback allowing me to reflect on the frequency I gave praise (see Figure 3) and the impact it had on students.
As displayed, there were more praise statements given to Other Students because throughout the lesson, praise was being distributed continually. Brenda had not yet participated in the study until Day 3. Praise was inconsistent with Elvin. When he was on-task, he was greatly involved in the activities, and was rewarded for any on-task behavior he displayed. However, when he displayed off-task behavior, frequent redirection was required. Sienna and Karoline received the most praise because of the amount of times they displayed on-task behavior, interacted with their peers, took initiative to complete tasks, asked and answered questions, and put effort into their work. Gradual participation from Brenda is also evident on this graph. Brenda lacked confidence in the beginning of the study but steadily began to gain confidence as she helped an ELL and became her peer tutor. She also became more comfortable asking clarifying questions or honestly telling me she did not understand a concept. A result of an absence of praise on certain days, as mentioned in certain sections of Chapter 4, may have been because of the time I spent with certain groups or the difficulty of hearing praise from the video.
on days students were greatly involved in a lesson. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Elvin was absent on Day 6.

Summary

This chapter revealed my findings both qualitatively and quantitatively. Several themes surfaced from my two research questions including increased confidence, initiative, and stronger peer communication. Furthermore, student feedback via individual interviews provided relevant information for me to consider if I intend to implement this strategy long term. The subsequent chapter will present a discussion of the overall study and results. It will also provide limitations that may have impacted the study as well as an action plan to further refine the study.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the overall study focused on the following research questions: 1) What is the impact of using frequent, behavior-specific praise with respect to increasing engagement as defined by frequency of class participation? 2) In what ways will increasing the amount of praise I give to my students affect my professional development as a teacher? The study was performed with third grade students over a one-month duration during math instruction. I will summarize the purpose of the study and main ideas from the literature relative to my study as it was addressed in Chapter 2. The overall findings and my personal thoughts based on the data will also be shared. I will conclude this chapter with the limitations discovered as the study was being performed and an action plan for implementing my study into the educational setting where I currently work.

Summary

The focus of this study was to determine whether BSP increased student engagement and impacted the frequency of class participation. Additionally, this study examined how the increase in the amount of praise I gave to my students affected my professional growth as a teacher. One of the biggest challenges as an educator is getting students actively engaged in classroom instruction. Disengagement ranges from lack of understanding of the subject matter to overall lack of motivation. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of frequent BSP and determine if it impacted student engagement as demonstrated through class participation.

Previous literature has posed both positive and negative views when using BSP. Students may respond positively when praise is given spontaneously. Further, BSP may highlight a student’s progress and help establish teacher-student relationships (Brophy, 1981). Although BSP can highlight a student’s accomplishments whether behaviorally or academically, it may
also result in relying on the teacher praise rather than developing intrinsic motivation. Previous research found that students should follow teacher directions without expecting rewards (Kohn, 1999; Saeveryt, 2011). The two types of praise presented in the literature, effort and ability, were also known to contain different effects. Praise for ability (e.g. You are really smart at math.) provides children with the perception that intelligence cannot be changed causing them to doubt their abilities (Dweck, 2006), while praise for effort (e.g., You worked hard on the problem.) provides children with the perception that intelligence is malleable thus allowing them to embrace challenges (Dweck, 2010). Literature gathered on the impact of professional development presented positive outcomes. Teachers enhance and strengthen their current teaching practices through collaboration, sharing, assessing, and self-reflection (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Vescio et al., 2007). Student achievement is positively impacted with the support of professional development.

Findings Restated

Using multiple data sources, my findings revealed that, when praised, students acquired perseverance and confidence, took initiative to apply their own strategies to maximize their learning, and strengthened peer communication with the ability to articulate their ideas to one another. Students learned to utilize their peers seeking support from them, comparing answers, and engaging in productive conversation. Each time I assigned work, I followed with, “Ask your group members for help.” Giving praise throughout the lessons increased student motivation which was revealed through on-task behavior and rich peer conversations. My findings suggest that increasing the amount of praise I gave to my students influenced them to facilitate their own learning. Since the study has ended, the traditional teacher role has changed as I have given the students more opportunities to peer teach. Praising them for their efforts has made a difference
more so in the students who do not typically participate in class. Lastly, giving BSP provided me with valuable student feedback imperative for me to consider if I intend to implement this strategy long term and offer other teachers to do the same.

**Personal thoughts of findings.** Although various data sources were utilized, the study yielded mixed results as the School Engagement Survey did not reflect the same data as my reflective teaching journal, observational checklist, and individual interviews. The qualitative data deemed to be the most valuable as it provided me with deeper insight of my students’ perceptions of BSP, immediate student feedback both verbally (e.g., interviews) and nonverbally (i.e., behavior during instruction) upon receiving BSP, and an opportunity to self-reflect on the quality of my teaching practice. Watching the videos made me more cognizant of how often I was giving praise to my students and allowed me to evaluate how I can improve in the area of motivational strategies. Being able to self-monitor became a helpful strategy as I was also more observant of student behavior and the frequency of class participation when praise was given. “Self-monitoring appears to be an effective intervention for increasing the use of praise” (Kalis, Vannest, & Parker, 2007, p. 25). Interview responses from the four focal students and the results from the observational checklist indicated that BSP can increase a student’s engagement with the desire to frequently participate in class. Per their interview responses, focal students felt that BSP increased their level of engagement because of the recognition they received. Two of the four students significantly displayed more engagement than the other two (see Figure 2, p. 39). Furthermore, the focal students believed that giving them BSP would raise the awareness of other students to model the same behavior they were being praised for. When reflecting on the amount of BSP I gave to “Other Students” (see Figure 3, p. 54), more praise was given to other students because as I monitored the room, engagement took place throughout the class both
individually and collaboratively. I was not restricted to four students, which therefore, made the BSP feel more automatic and natural.

The positive effects of the study were evident as indicated by students like Karoline, who made tremendous progress throughout the study, and continued to thrive after the study ended. With the support of the verbal rewards, she gradually became less dependent on the praise, and appeared to be much intrinsically motivated. In many of the videos, Karoline was captured conscientiously working out the math problems as I monitored other students in the room. Unlike what previous literature has stated, Karoline's intrinsic motivation increased with the praise as she did not depend on it to remain engaged. This finding was contrary to what was indicated by Brophy (1981) and other researchers (Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 1999; Kohn, 1999).

Limitations

A major limitation of the study relates to the length and scope of the study. Results of a study conducted in one classroom for a period of one month cannot be generalized to the broader population of elementary third grade classrooms.

Another limitation of the study was the difficulty of hearing the praise on the video camera and being able to capture all the praise delivered. In addition, to the “on-task” noise, some praise was given quietly preventing it from being heard over the video. This limitation may have resulted in inaccurate tally recordings on my observational checklist, which affected the results displayed in the graphs. As noted in my reflective teaching journal and mentioned in Chapter 4, several praise statements were unheard because of the peer interaction. Although students were actively engaged and collaborating, it would have been nice to be able to record the conversations on video. This would have added to my thoughts in my reflective teaching journal as well.
A third limitation was the way in which Brenda was observed. As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, Brenda was not permitted to be on video, which required me to manually track the praise I gave her, the number of times she raised her hand, and record the behavior she exhibited throughout the study. Holding a clipboard and having to write down information while at the same time teaching the lesson and delivering praise became a cumbersome task. It was difficult to both praise and tally without making it seem planned, and because I had to track her behavior manually, it may have been more practical to focus on other students. Again, this may have altered the results on my observational checklist as well as given me an insufficient amount of information about her behavior (i.e., peer interaction, work habits) to write in my reflective teaching journal.

Initially, Brenda was not initially a member of the focal group. The original student intended to participate in the study would have been a good candidate as he lacked motivation to remain engaged in lessons and participate in class. Moreover, he was a student performing below grade level receiving 640 minutes of resource support daily. Unfortunately, he was not able to participate as he opted out of the study although his mom had agreed to have him be a part of it. Finally, serving the role as both the teacher and researcher may have modified the results on my observational checklist.

**Action Plan**

This project yielded significant findings that were apparent through my observational checklist, reflective teaching journal entries, and student interviews. Students became more engaged as BSP was distributed. As shared by my focal students, giving BSP made them want to work harder and participate more. Some even shared that praising them publicly was a way to make others pay attention and participate. Results for my study were in agreement with what
Bandura states. “Results of numerous studies show that rewarded modeling is generally more effective than modeling alone in fostering similar patterns of behavior” (Bandura, 1986 p. 284). Further, some students were observed becoming intrinsically motivated, interacting with their peers and persevering even through challenging problems, without the BSP. The results of this study have proven to be effective as my students continue to remain engaged during instructional time, doing well both with and without the praise. With these results, an action plan involving professional development, more specifically, PLC, with the school staff should be discussed and possibly developed to improve student engagement and teacher practice in all classes.

**Plan significance.** Implementing the use of BSP to impact student engagement would be beneficial for both students and teacher. If used consistently and adequately, BSP can increase student engagement allowing for more class participation and peer interaction. Students’ responses may be more thoughtful and accurate. This was evident in the results of this action research study, which displayed an increase in class participation amongst all students and productive peer interaction. Student responses, as anticipated, were related to the academic content being introduced.

**Plan dissemination.** With the positive outcomes of implementing BSP, this positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) approach will be introduced to all teachers and specialists (i.e., resource teacher, speech therapist, psychologist) at Sierra Elementary School. All staff would benefit from the plan given that everyone interacts with students in some capacity. I have already shared my results with one colleague and they have displayed interest in utilizing this tool in their classroom as well.

**Implementation of action plan.** My study will be shared with my colleagues at an upcoming staff meeting. Based on their feedback, if my colleagues display interest, in further
detail, I will share key points from the literature, the methods used to execute the study as well as reveal the results. Most importantly, I will share my personal thoughts and success stories as a result of using BSP. There is very little training necessary; one staff meeting may be all I need to explain what is needed and how to execute it. Staff will receive copies of the data sources I used. Being that the school year is coming to an end, I will provide the same discussion at a PLC prior to the new school year.

Since PLCs are weekly, I feel it would be valuable for those teachers that choose to implement BSP, to share out their results and observations based on the data sources used. To ensure validity and appropriateness of how BSP is being given and tracked, the principal or academic coach can make periodic, unannounced classroom visits using their own observational checklist to track the number of times teachers are giving BSP and the number of hands raised when the teacher asks a question. These visits can encourage teachers to make BSP a norm in their classroom management. Visits can be brief, no more than 5-10 minutes at a time. With the information gathered from the principal and/or academic coach, results can be graphed so that teachers can see the progress. These results can also be shared at future PLCs. With only one video camera on site, teachers can take turns video recording their instruction for 2-3 weeks, 3 days a week. Having to video record each lesson may pose a challenge for some teachers. Another possible strategy of tracking the praise given and the number of times students raise their hands is the use of a clicker. Unfortunately, with this strategy, only one of the two items can be tracked. If clickers are used, the principal can decide if they prefer to track the praise or the number of hands raised.
Conclusion

As the teacher and researcher, the study allowed me to reflect and improve my teaching practice, thus managing and promoting classroom participation more effectively. If teachers were skillfully trained to use BSP effectively, students would become more motivated and involved in the lessons. Consequently, teachers that struggle to maintain student engagement may result in lower academic achievement, less student engagement, and possibly increased behavior challenges. On a regular basis, I hear the frustrations from teachers of students not listening or paying attention in class and how the teachers easily revert to negative consequences. I, too, have experienced the convenience of “calling out” those students and the negative behavior being displayed, but having performed this study, I am more conscientious of praising and rewarding positive behavior. Having the opportunity to listen and take in the comments shared by my focal students as well as witnessing the positive behavior from the rest of the class has validated the significance of giving BSP.
References


http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Kpcr2_bXla0C&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=my+pedagogic+creed+1897&ots=XpRDX4VzXZ&sig=CWDhj_h8ANFFZhah_OAah5i


### Appendix A
Observational Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Start Time</th>
<th>End Time</th>
<th>Student Behavior/Response</th>
<th>Behavior-Specific Praise (Teacher)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td># of times of specific-praise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td># of times raised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Description of Participants (i.e. asked a question; added information to discussion, worked with peers, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student**
- Karoline
- Elvin
- Brenda
- Sienna
- Other Students (behavior and BSP)
Appendix B

School Engagement Survey

Name ________________________________

Directions: Listen to the statements as I read them aloud. Choose only one answer for each statement.

1. In class, I work as hard as I can.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

2. When I’m in class, I participate in class discussions.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

3. When I’m in class, I just act like I’m working.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

4. I pay attention in class.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

5. When I’m in class, I listen very carefully.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

6. I don’t try very hard in school.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

7. In class, I do just enough to get by.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

8. When I’m in class, I think about other things.
   a. very true   b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true
9. When we work on something in class, I feel interested.
   a. very true     b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

10. When we work on something in class, I get involved.
    a. very true     b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

11. When my teacher explains new material, I feel bored.
    a. Very true     b. Sort of true    c. not very true   d. not at all true

12. I work on my class work because it’s interesting.
    a. very true     b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true

13. I work on my class work because I think it’s important.
    a. Very true     b. Sort of true    c. not very true   d. not at all true

14. I work on my class work because doing well in school is important to me.
    a. very true     b. sort of true   c. not very true   d. not at all true


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\(^2\) The survey includes items from the Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS) and an unpublished dissertation by Wellborn.

\(^3\) Some of the questions from the School Engagement Survey (SES) were borrowed from Wellborn as cited by Skinner et al.
Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. When I praised you for what you were doing during math time, how did that make you feel?

2. Do you feel you have been participating more in class? Why?

3. Do you feel more motivated to participate and pay attention to the lessons? Why?

4. Can you think of a positive statement that I told you that made you want to keep working? What was it about the statement that made you feel this way?

5. Did the praise make you work harder and/or more willing to participate? Why?

Additional follow up questions were asked based on students' responses and data collected during the study.