

Anderson, Leland M.

LDS Doctrinal Insights into Contemporary Pedagogical Theories about Effective Praise

Faculty Mentor: K. Richard Young, Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Effective praise has many applications as a powerful means for motivating people. This research reviews literature about effective praise and shows how doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) (1) corroborates and (2) enlightens contemporary pedagogical theories about effective praise. The research culminates in an honors thesis available through the University's Harold B. Lee Library.

Best practice literature and research suggests that effective praise is specific, is given contingent to noteworthy behavior, uses the name of the person being praised, and teaches why a praised behavior is desirable. Consider how these qualities exist in the following example:

[Michael,] when you asked me if you could borrow a book, you looked at me, you used a pleasant voice tone, you asked specifically if you could borrow the textbook, you said 'please,' and after I said 'yes' and gave you the book, you said 'thank you.' You did an excellent job of using all of those steps. That's very important, because when you make a request in an appropriate manner, you are much more likely to have the request granted.¹

This example of praise contains attention to detail by describing specific actions (you looked, you used, you asked, you said). Such specific praise fosters a healthy self-image since it shows that the praiser cares enough about the person being praised to pay close attention to his or her behavior. This example also seems to be given contingent to noteworthy behavior; it sounds as if it has been given in timely connection to deserving behavior. To be instructional, this example not only cites a noteworthy action, but also explains why the action is desirable. The praiser points out that certain parts of a request make the request more likely to be granted. Lastly, this example begins with the person's name being called. Research recognizes that "a positive response from a child is more likely if the teacher mentions the child's name when praising him."²

Research also suggests that unspecific praise may actually do more harm than good. Vague, unspecific praise may result in confusion about what is being praised. For example, if a teacher says, "Andrew, you have written a brilliant paper" (vague praise), Andrew may not know specifically what made his paper "excellent" and may, therefore, not be able to repeat the behavior. Or, Johnny sitting next to him may privately think, "The teacher didn't praise my paper; I must not be as smart as Andrew." Unspecific praise can be misunderstood or kindle competition. However, specific statements such as, "Andrew, you have written a brilliant paper; you consulted credible sources, you showed how your ideas relate to others', and you have organized each paragraph clearly" are less likely to result in confusion or hurt pride. Rather, Johnny may think, "If I follow Andrew's good example, I can also write a successful paper." Such responses are more likely if the teacher emphasizes to Johnny and other classmates that they can perform well with effort and correct strategies which she will help supply.

A careful review of LDS doctrinal sources (scripture and the words of latter-day prophets) reveals how they corroborate and enlighten contemporary theories about effective praise. No one provides a better model of effective praise than Jesus Christ. For example, after questioning His disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” (Matt. 16:13), they responded, “Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14). Christ then queried, “But whom say ye that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). Simon Peter answered, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), to which Christ responded approvingly and specifically, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17). Note how Christ specifically pointed out to Peter that he had received revelation, understood it, and spoken in response to it. In other words, Peter had correctly understood and acted on a heavenly prompting. Jesus then included instruction with his praise: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Thus Christ taught Peter that His church would be built upon revelation, and Peter’s recognizing and acting on revelation would allow Peter to help establish the Church upon a rock-like foundation: revelation. How masterfully Jesus uses praise to fortify Peter’s faith and instruct Peter in establishing Christ’s church! Jesus called Peter’s name, used praise specifically, praised contingent to desired behavior, and deepened Peter’s understanding.

Scriptural examples of praise also suggest at least three possible enhancements to contemporary theories of praise: First, praise God since he is the giver of gifts and the source of all knowledge, power, and righteousness. As the perfect example, Christ gave praise and glory to his father. The psalms and many other scriptures suggest that we should praise God (see Psalm 96). By praising him, we remain humble and grateful, conditions that promote receiving more guidance and blessings from Him. Second, follow praise with a commandment or responsibility to show faith in continued performance. Christ trusted Peter with “the keys of the kingdom” (see Matthew 16:19), and an angel commanded Alma to “preach again to the people” (see Alma 8:16). Responsibilities are also given to many others mentioned in the scriptures after praise of their faithfulness. Third, collaborate with others to seek after all that is praiseworthy. In a collaborative atmosphere we can “teach one another words of wisdom” and eliminate pride and competition that sometimes accompany “the praise of the world” (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 and 1 Nephi 13:9).

Other scriptural examples of divine praise include (and are not limited to) The Church in Thyratira (see Revelation 2:19), Lehi (see 1 Nephi 1-2), Nephi (see 1 Nephi 11), Alma (see Alma 8:8-18), Nephi (see Helaman 7-10), Brother of Jared (see Ether 3), Mormon (see Mormon 1:2-4), and Oliver Cowdery (see Doctrine & Covenants 6).

I thoroughly enjoyed my research process and writing the honors thesis. As a first year secondary school teacher, I have many opportunities to use effective praise as one means to motivate my students. I am using what I have learned and plan to share what I have learned with others.³

¹ Young, K. R., & West, R. P., Marchant, M., Morgan, C. J., & Mitchem, K. (1997). *Prevention plus: teacher implementation guide*. Logan: Utah State University Research Foundation, Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at Risk, p. 20.

² O’Leary, K & O’Leary, S. (1977). *Classroom management: the successful use of behavior modification* (2nd ed.). New York: Pergamon Press, p. 418.

³ I express many thanks to Brigham Young University and K. Richard Young for facilitating my research.