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SPED 305

Appraisal: An Evaluation of Praise for Students with Disabilities

From the perspective of a person without a disability, it would seem like individuals with disabilities would have very low self-esteem. In the classroom, many teachers believe that by using more praise, they can help improve the self-esteem of their disabled students, and therefore help them succeed in school and be more confident in tasks they take up. But in both these cases, the conclusion is being drawn from a vantage point that does not accurately display the state of matters for students with disabilities. Instead of being overly praised to help bridge a self-esteem gap that doesn't exist, students with disabilities need to be given constructive criticism and meaningful feedback just like other students.

The idea that members of the disabled population have a lower self-concept is easily deduced by evaluating the plight of a one with a disability. Essentially, if someone has such a limitation, how could they have a positive self image? According to Blake and Rust who studied the self-esteem of students with disabilities, this obvious conclusion is not the case (2002). In fact, "self-esteem and self-efficacy measures were either the same as or higher than the normative sample" (Blake and Rust, 2002). Therefore, contrary to our previous deduction, students with disabilities do not have a deficit in self-esteem. It is possible that students with disabilities have higher levels of self-esteem because teachers praise them all the time, but this case was shown to be far from the norm. Instead, students with disabilities are far more likely to receive reprimand than praise from teachers (Sutherland and Wheby, 2001). Therefore, praise and self-esteem are independent factors, and there seems to be no basis for using unnecessary praise to raise the self-esteem of students with disabilities.

Even if this evidence is not convincing enough, there is a no good evidence that

using hollow praise has any measurable benefits and can actually be detrimental. Instead, according to Marshall Duke, professor of psychology at Emory University, self-esteem is not the key factor in making students “happier, achieve more, or become more capable or competent” (Delisio, 2002). Instead of focusing on self-esteem, teachers should be focusing on the confidence of students in their abilities, not just students’ self image. When teachers use “blanket, automatic, or empty praise,” the net effect is as empty as the praise; students can learn much more from substantive comments (Delisio, 2002). Self-esteem is still an issue, but a classroom atmosphere in which children “feel comfortable and secure and classmates support one another” is a better way to attempt to raise self-esteem than using empty words (Delisio, 2002). In fact, using hollow praise as a way to build self-esteem can create the wrong self-esteem. Essentially, students who receive constant praise become “approval junkies.” Instead of having an intrinsic motivation to do things, students who are constantly praised always need the carrot (Delisio 2002). Using constructive comments, on the other hand, tends to build intrinsic motivation, where students want to do activities because they want to, not because of an award. Therefore, using hollow praise is clearly not as effective of a teaching strategy as using meaningful and constructive comments to assess students work.

Students with disabilities are not more likely to have lower self-esteem than anyone else in the general population. The misconception that such a gap exists could make some teachers believe that overly praising students would help raise the self-esteem of these students and help them achieve better in school. Instead, over praising builds the wrong type of self-esteem that can make disabled students more dependent on being bribed than an intrinsic desire to act. By using constructive criticism instead of hollow and sometimes completely meaningless praise, teachers can help build confidence in students and in their own work, in turn aiding them a long the path of success in school.

Works Cited

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