

The Effects of Verbal Praise on the Amount of Time Students with Emotional Disabilities Spend  
in the Classroom: A Quantitative Study

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### Purpose

Sutherland, Wehby, & Yoder (2002) found a positive relationship between praise and the completion of academic work in elementary and middle school students with emotional and learning disabilities in self-contained classrooms. Kennedy & Jolivette (2008) found evidence that increasing the amount of verbal praise given to children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) will decrease the amount of time they spend outside of the classroom due to the teacher asking them to leave, their choice to leave, or spending time serving in-school suspensions. The two subjects were in a self-contained elementary school classroom in a residential treatment facility. The present study will apply the findings of these two studies to a sample of secondary students in a separate private day school. The effects of the increased amount of verbal praise will be examined to determine the impact on the amount of time students spend in the classroom. Excellent logic chain.

### Method

#### *Participants and Setting*

Participants were 45 secondary school students (42 male, 3 female) aged 15-20 in five self-contained classrooms in a separate private day school in the mid-Atlantic region. All 45 of the students have been identified as having a primary disability of emotional disability (ED). Of the 45 students, 25 were black, 12 were white, and 8 were Hispanic. Previous testing indicated that all students were below average in intelligence and performed significantly below grade level in both reading and mathematics. The students were all referred to the school by their local school districts due to behavioral issues. Are they eligible for special education services in the category of ED under IDEA?

Permission to perform the study was obtained from the principal of the school. The five classrooms were determined through convenience sampling of the desired characteristics of the population being studied. The five teachers in this study have master's degrees in special education, have been teaching for over five years and have postgraduate professional teaching licenses. The teachers (2 male, 3 female) were aged 30-45 with three being African-American and two being Caucasian. The assistant teachers had high school diplomas and had been working at the school for at least two years. The assistant teachers (3 male, 2 female) were aged 20-30 with four being African-American and one being Caucasian. Both the teachers and the assistant teachers agreed to participate in a study of their behavior on the students and signed an informed consent forms. Each teacher and assistant teacher was compensated 200 dollars for their participation in the eight weeks of the study.

The separate private day school consists of 22 self-contained classrooms and educates students in grades K-12. The secondary level school day is broken up into eight intervals of 50 minutes in length that include instruction in required academic subjects, core academic areas, career education, and social skills. Each classroom has a capacity of nine students and is taught by a licensed special education teacher and an assistant teacher. Behavior staff members are available to help manage students when they are engaging in inappropriate behaviors. The school has a structured behavior level system and the classroom staff is responsible for keeping data on each student for each interval of the day. This data is collected by the assistant teacher on a behavior card that the student fills out each day. "fills out" is a bit colloquial...

Not sure what you mean by "When they attend" here. Attend what? When they attend, students in this setting are outside of the classroom because they are receiving a related service, they choose to spend time in a support area to calm down and refocus, they are referred to the

support area for disruptive behavior, they are referred to the support area for an in-school suspension due to severe behavior (i.e. aggression, leaving campus, etc.) or they leave the classroom and refuse to enter a designated area for a period of time. Related services tend be minimal with students being out of the classroom for 1-2 hours a week. If a student feels they are becoming overwhelmed, they can choose to go to the support area for about 8-10 minutes to calm down. When a student is referred to the support area by the teacher, they are there for about 8-10 minutes and the classroom staff will discuss their behavior with them before they return. An in-school suspension takes place in the support area and will last anywhere from half a day to a full day depending on the infraction and the student's ability to behave appropriately during the in-school suspension. There are occasions when students will walk out of the classroom and wander through the building. This behavior is considered "out of location" and starts as soon as the student crosses the threshold of the classroom door without permission. Students are sent to support for walking out of location and are escorted by staff until they enter the support area. The support area consists of several small rooms in the middle of the hall and is supervised by a member of the behavior staff. The time started and time finished that a student is in support or out of location is logged by the behavior staff.

#### *Data Collection & Dependent Variables*

The primary dependent variable for this study was the amount of time spent outside of the classroom for self-directed support, teacher referred support, in-school suspension, and out of location. This data will be collected by the assistant teacher and kept in a log for each student. Praise will be logged using tick marks for each interval on each student's daily behavior card. The amount of time spent out of the classroom will be recorded on a behavior support data

instrument. If the assistant teacher is out of the room, the teacher will log this data. The support data log will also be kept by the behavior staff and used for comparison.

### *Experimental Design & Independent Variable*

This study was broken up into two consecutive periods of four weeks each. Baseline data was collected during the first four-week period and data was collected based on the intervention during the second four week period. During the week prior to the start of the study, the researcher met with each of the classrooms. The researcher explained that a study was being conducted and the students may see their teachers change their behavior. The researcher also explained they would be collecting data based on the students' behavior to evaluate the effects of the change in the teacher's behavior. Written assent was obtained individually from each of the students after the classroom meeting. The researcher contacted each student's guardian and explained they would like to use data already being kept on the student for their study. The researcher explained they were studying the impact of certain teacher behaviors on the behavior of the students and they could not disclose the full purpose of the study because if the students knew the true purpose of the study, the results may not be accurate. Permission to include these students in the study was obtained from parents through an informed consent form. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher met with each of the classrooms to debrief and explain the purpose of the study. A debriefing form was mailed to each guardian to ensure they understood the purpose of the study and the reasons that the full purpose was not divulged at the outset.

Baseline data was collected on both the amount of verbal praise given and the amount of time students spend outside of the classroom for a four-week period. Verbal praise will be defined as a positive or encouraging verbal statement given by the teacher in response to a positive or desirable classroom behavior. Examp0les would be a nice addition... Positive or

desirable behaviors include but are not limited to sitting quietly during the lesson, raising hands to be called on, staying on task, demonstrating effort towards the lesson, and following directions. Each statement of verbal praise will be logged for each interval by the assistant teacher on each student's behavior card using a tick mark next to that interval.

Hey, this is a really sweet idea! I wonder if we could find a group of co-teachers or paras and train them to prompt the GUF (Guy Up Front) to praise student behavior. I've not seen that in the literature. Training was provided for the assistant teachers to identify verbal praise. The training focused on the different types of verbal praise and the assistant teachers were able to accurately identify verbal praise. The assistant teachers met at the beginning of each of the eight weeks of the study for a refresher on verbal praise to ensure observer accuracy. The researcher visited each classroom for one interval each week to observe verbal praise. The assistant teacher shared their results from the interval that was observed with the researched at the end of that day to help facilitate consistency in observations of verbal praise. The assistant teacher also kept a log of the time a student leaves the classroom and the time they reenter. These times were averaged with the log of the behavior staff for the same data. The amount of time each student spent outside of the classroom was tabulated by the researcher both per interval and per day. The amount of verbal praise given to each student was given was calculated by the assistant teacher and was recorded on the daily behavior card for each student both per interval and per day.

During the last week of the four week baseline period, each of the teachers participated in the training on verbal praise. They were asked to provide at least two statements of verbal praise to each student in the classroom for each interval of the day during the four week intervention period. The assistant teachers continued to track verbal praise using tick marks for each interval

on the behavior cards. The assistant teachers continued to keep a log of the amount of time students left and reentered the classroom for the four week period of the intervention. These times were averaged with the log of the behavior staff for the same data. The amount of time each student spent outside of the classroom was tabulated both per interval and per day. The amount of verbal praise each student was given was calculated by student both per interval and per day.

### *Data Analysis*

The data for students who were absent for more than seven days during the study was discarded. The remaining data was analyzed through several techniques. The data was broken into two separate groups with one group being the baseline data from the first four week period and the other group being the intervention from the second four week period. An ANOVA test was used to determine if the students spent a significantly greater amount of time in the classroom each day during either the baseline period or the intervention period. A Pearson correlation was also used to analyze the relationship between the amount of verbal praise received and the amount of time spent out of the classroom at both the interval and daily level.

Good idea. It gets a little fuzzy on the independent variable at the fourth week part. Are we doing a study to describe what is happening in the classroom, a study to increase teacher use of verbal praise or both? I think a little stronger treatment of inter-rater reliability is in order as well. Other than that, this is a good idea with a clear plan. Let's do it!

### References

- Kennedy, C. & Jolivette, K. (2008). The Effects of Positive Verbal Reinforcement on the Time Spent Outside of the Classroom for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in a Residential Setting. *Behavioral Disorders* 33(4) 211-221.
- Sutherland, K. S., Wehby, J. H., & Yoder, P. J. (2002). Examining the Relationship Between Teacher Praise and Opportunities for Students with EBD to Respond to Academic Requests. *Journal of Emotional & Behavioral Disorders* 10(1) 5-14.