
Elementary Students' Preferences for Teacher Praise

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this exploratory, descriptive study was to investigate elementary students' preferences for praise used in the classroom. An instrument was developed to measure upper elementary school students' preferences for teacher praise. The items measured preferences for how often teachers should give students different types of feedback (particularly ability and effort feedback) as well as the degree to which students felt that feedback should be given publicly, privately or not at all. Gender and cross-sectional developmental differences were investigated using the resultant scales and Schunk's (1991) hypothesis that students' need for effort feedback declines with age while the need for ability feedback increases with age was tested. Some gender and age differences were found but Schunk's hypothesis was not supported.

INTRODUCTION

Hattie (1993) reviewed 134 meta-analytic studies that evaluated the impact of various educational practices and innovations on the academic achievement of nearly 15 million students. He found that teacher feedback was the most powerful variable in terms of enhancing achievement and noted that the simplest prescription for improving education must be dollops of feedback and praise. Hattie reported effect sizes of 1.13 for teacher reinforcement (praise), 0.65 for feedback and remediation and 0.50 for mastery learning based on feedback. Hattie defined feedback as providing information to the students about how and why they understand or misunderstand and what directions the student must take to improve. This can be described as instructional feedback. The importance of teacher feedback for academic achievement are highlighted by the findings of this large database but the issue as to what students think about feedback and praise has largely been ignored. Some studies (Elwell & Tiberio, 1994; Houghton, Merrett, & Wheldall, 1988; Sharp, 1985) have investigated high school students' preferences for teacher praise but little or no research has been conducted to measure how elementary school students respond to what their teachers say to them or to tap students' preferences for the use of praise and different types of feedback in the elementary classroom.

Teacher Praise and Feedback

General Praise

In his seminal work on teacher praise, Brophy (1981) defined praise as commending the worth of or to express admiration. He noted that when teachers praise students they do not focus on the degree of success achieved but rather express positive affect and they place the students' achievements and behaviour in context by giving information regarding its value. Brophy cited classroom-based research which indicated that only six percent of interactions in the classroom involved praise. He concluded that typical classrooms do not show high rates of praise and noted that even in classrooms where teachers praised each student once every five minutes that the average student would be praised once every two hours or 3 times a day or 15 times a week.

Thomas (1991) noted that the use of positive reinforcement has a powerful impact on student behaviour. He described three components needed for praising students and referred to this process as descriptive reinforcement. The process involved (a) personalising the praise by using the student's name, (b) using a variety of general praise words like nice going, well done, tremendous, and outstanding, and (c) including a specific description of what the student did to merit praise. Thomas presented 110 words and phrases that constitute general praise that can be used in the second component for praising students. Thomas' third component builds on the work of Brophy (1981) by noting that praise should only be given contingently and should include a clear and detailed description of the specific achievement or behaviour that is being praised.

Attributional Feedback

Attributional feedback relates to teachers attributing success in a task or a performance to a specific reason. Two main types of attributional feedback have been investigated in the literature. Some studies have focused on attributing success to effort using effort feedback ("You've been working hard"; "Your results reflect the great effort that you have put in"; "You're trying really hard"), some have focussed on ability feedback ("Well done, you're really smart at maths"; "Good work, you're really good at reading"; "Gee you're a good student"; "You seem very smart in science") while some have used a blend of the two (See Craven, Marsh, & Debus,

1991 and Dohrn & Bryan, 1994 for summaries of these studies).

Marsh (1990) provided correlational support for the importance of ability feedback when he reported relationships that suggested that students who attributed their successes to ability had better academic skills and academic self-concepts than those students who did not. Furthermore, Craven, Marsh and Debus (1991) cited three USA studies that indicated that ability feedback was most valued by students and was the dominant influence on academic self-concept formation and development. Dohrn and Bryan (1994) noted that studies have shown that attribution feedback, particularly ability feedback, when combined with teaching students specific task strategies in maths and reading leads children to persist longer, acquire adaptive attributions and make greater gains in academic achievement.

Schunk (1991) highlighted the need to explore the role of attributional feedback (effort or ability) over extended periods, specifically, how students integrate feedback at different stages of development. For example, effort feedback may be credible in the early stages of learning when students need to expend effort to succeed. However, as skills develop, they ought to succeed with less effort; thus ability feedback may become more credible. This hypothesis has not been tested due to the absence of a reliable and valid measurement instrument to assess elementary school students' preferences for specific types of feedback and praise.

Measuring Students' Preferences for Teacher Praise

Elwell and Tiberio (1994) conducted a study in the high school environment with 620 New York students in response to their observation that little research exists on how students perceive teacher feedback and reward. They posed the following questions: "Do differences exist in how students want to be praised? Can we identify those differences? In an endeavour to address these questions they developed the Praise Attitude Questionnaire (PAQ) based on the earlier work of Sharp (1985) who found that of 251 Australian high school students aged 12 to 16 years, 26% preferred to be praised loudly and publicly when they achieved on an academic task, 64% preferred to be praised quietly and privately, while 10% preferred teachers to say nothing at all.

The Praise Attitude Questionnaire (Elwell & Tiberio, 1994) consisted of five questions about students' attitudes towards teacher praise for academic work and two questions that focus on praise for behaviour. The seven PAQ items are as follows.

1. *Should you be praised for doing your schoolwork? All the time; Sometimes; Never.*
2. *Should you be praised for being well behaved at school? All the time; Sometimes; Never.*
3. *When you do something well in class such as answering*

a question correctly, do you prefer your teacher to: Praise you loudly, Praise you quietly, Say nothing at all?

4. *When you are well behaved in class such as working quietly at your desk, do you prefer your teacher to: Praise you loudly, Praise you quietly, Say nothing at all?*
5. *If you receive the highest grade on a test do you prefer the teacher to: Praise you loudly, Praise you quietly, Say nothing at all?*
6. *When the teacher praises a student for giving the correct answer, do you think the teacher: wants the student to feel good about being right, or wants the entire class to know the answer was correct and should be remembered?*
7. *When the teacher writes corrections on your assignment, which of these comments do you prefer: In comparison with the other students your work is good or bad; You have the right answers but you could have stated them more clearly; In comparison to your last paper you learned a lot.*

Elwell and Tiberio's (1994) findings, using the PAQ, suggested that high school students from New York reacted differently to praise and that teachers need to know more about when, where and under what circumstances praise should be used. The students generally perceived praise as appropriate and expected to receive it for academic behaviours but not for social behaviour. Some 40% of students preferred praise to be given loudly and publicly leaving 60% of students preferring quiet, private praise or no praise at all. These results provided some support for the view that praise delivered publicly by a teacher may be reinforcing for some but not for all and that praise may even be perceived as punishing by some students if delivered in the presence of a peer group (Brophy, 1981; Houghton, et al., 1988). It seems that reward and approval in the form of praise is internalised differently by students depending on their preference for public or private praise and their grade level.

Additionally, there appears to be significant differences between the two samples of Australian and American high school students with regards to preferences about being given public and private praise. When comparing Sharp's (1985) Australian sample to Elwell and Tiberio's (1994) American sample using the same question, it was noted that proportionally more Australian (64%) than American (35%) students preferred quiet, private praise when they did something well in class while fewer Australian students preferred loud praise (26% vs 39%) and no praise (10% vs 26%) when compared with their American counterparts. It is of note that over one quarter of the American students surveyed preferred their teachers not to praise them at all. American students appear to be split with regards to how they would like to be praised while Australian students have a strong preference to be praised quietly. This preference may be because they don't want to stand out amongst their peers or be publicly identified in a class situation.

Aim of the Study

The initial aim of this study is to develop an instrument to measure upper elementary school students' preferences for teacher praise based on Elwell and Tiberio's (1994) PAQ. Gender and cross-sectional developmental differences will then be investigated using the resultant scales and Schunk's (1991) hypothesis that students' need for effort feedback declines with age while the need for ability feedback increases with age will be tested.

METHOD

Subjects

A sample of 747 students in Years 3 to 6 at six rural elementary schools in New South Wales, Australia participated in the study. The schools were predominantly lower middle class schools with only a small percentage of children from non-European origin backgrounds. There were 396 (53%) boys and 351 girls with a mean age of 9.9 years and a standard deviation of 1.2 years. The age range was 8 to 12 years. The age breakdown was 8 yrs-112, 9 yrs-174, 10 yrs-199, 11 yrs-186, 12 yrs-76 and for Grade Gr 3-178, Gr 4-162, Gr 5-198, Gr 6-209.

Instrumentation

Ten items were written to measure three different constructs. Four items were designed to measure students' preferred frequency of being praised in response to four situations using an Often, Sometimes or Never response format (Items 1-4). Item 5 assessed whether students preferred to be praised for trying hard (effort) or for being smart (ability) while five items evaluated whether students preferred to be praised Loudly and publicly, Quietly and privately or Not praised at all in response to five situations (Items 6-10). The ten-item Preference for Teacher Praise (PTP) is presented below:

1. *How often should you be praised when you do good work?*
Often-Sometimes-Never.
2. *How often should you be praised for good behaviour in the classroom?*
Often-Sometimes-Never.
3. *How often should you be praised for trying really hard at your schoolwork?*
Often-Sometimes-Never.
4. *How often should you be praised for being smart and clever at your schoolwork?*
Often-Sometimes-Never.
5. *Which of the following would you rather your teacher praised you?*

6. *When you answer a question correctly in class do you prefer your teacher to praise you:*
Praise you loudly so everyone can hear-Praise you quietly so that only you can hear-Say nothing at all.
7. *When you receive a really good mark in a test do you prefer your teacher to praise you:*
Praise you loudly so everyone can hear-Praise you quietly so that only you can hear-Say nothing at all.
8. *When you are working quietly at your desk do you prefer your teacher to praise you:*
Praise you loudly so everyone can hear-Praise you quietly so that only you can hear-Say nothing at all.
9. *When you are well behaved in class do you prefer your teacher to praise you:*
Praise you loudly so everyone can hear-Praise you quietly so that only you can hear-Say nothing at all.
10. *When you are trying really hard at your work do you prefer your teacher to praise you:*
Praise you loudly so everyone can hear-Praise you quietly so that only you can hear-Say nothing at all.

Procedures

An experienced research assistant administered the 10-item Preference for Teacher Praise (PTP) in class time to classes of 25-30. If students experienced any difficulties with reading an item they were given assistance by having the item or words read to them.

RESULTS

The 10 items from the PTP were analysed using the scale development procedures described by Burnett and Dart (1997). They suggested that the number of factors believed to constitute a scale should be stipulated from the outset. They recommended the use of a Maximum Likelihood with an Oblimin Rotation method with specification of the factors to be extracted and dropping items that do not load on the hypothesised factors. Burnett and Dart compared this methodological approach to confirmatory factor analysis and found little difference in the solutions produced. This analytic process for the ten items resulted in three factors accounting for 59% of the variance with all items loading on the three hypothesised factors at 0.52 or greater. One item measured Preference for Effort or Ability Feedback (PEAF) while the alpha reliability coefficients for the four-item Praise Frequency Scale (PFS) and the five-item Praise Spotlight Scale (PSS) were moderate, being 0.71 and 0.78 respectively. The correlation between the PFS and PSS was 0.37 ($n=713$, $p<.001$). The frequencies for the responses by age for each of the 10 items constituting the PTP are presented in Table 1.

Four ANOVAs were computed for gender and age using the scores for the Praise Frequency Scale and the Praise

Table 1.

Frequency of responses by percentage for each of the 10 items constituting the PTP (n=747)

Praise Frequency Scale (PFS)		Often	Sometimes	Never	
1. How often should you be praised when you do good work?		36	58	6	
	8 years	27	61	13	
	9 years	35	57	8	
	10 years	39	56	6	
	11 years	45	52	3	
	12 years	26	71	3	
2. How often should you be praised for good behaviour in the classroom?		37	55	8	
	8 years	39	52	9	
	9 years	36	56	8	
	10 years	42	49	9	
	11 years	38	56	6	
	12 years	25	67	8	
3. How often should you be praised for trying really hard at your schoolwork?		50	45	5	
	8 years	40	52	8	
	9 years	48	45	7	
	10 years	55	41	4	
	11 years	49	46	5	
	12 years	52	48	0	
4. How often should you be praised for being smart and clever at your schoolwork?		35	54	11	
	8 years	42	43	15	
	9 years	39	50	11	
	10 years	34	56	10	
	11 years	34	55	11	
	12 years	20	67	13	
	AVERAGE	40	51	9	
Preference for Effort or Ability Feedback (PEAF)		For trying hard	For being smart		
5. Which of the following would you rather your teacher praised you:		84	16		
	8 years	74	26		
	9 years	82	18		
	10 years	86	14		
	11 years	88	12		
	12 years	83	17		
Praise Spotlight Scale (PSS)		Praise you:	Loudly	Quietly	Not at all
6. When you answer a question correctly in class do you prefer your teacher to:			31	52	17
	8 years		28	51	21
	9 years		36	55	9
	10 years		33	51	16
	11 years		28	54	18
	12 years		29	49	22
7. When you receive a really good mark in a test do you prefer your teacher to:			34	52	14
	8 years		27	55	18
	9 years		35	51	14
	10 years		37	48	15
	11 years		34	53	13
	12 years		35	62	3
8. When you are working quietly at your desk do you prefer your teacher to:			26	53	21
	8 years		23	55	22
	9 years		33	49	18
	10 years		28	50	22
	11 years		20	58	22
	12 years		21	53	26
9. When you are well behaved in class do you prefer your teacher to:			31	50	19
	8 years		26	53	21
	9 years		36	49	15
	10 years		36	44	20
	11 years		28	54	18
	12 years		25	51	24
10. When you are trying really hard at your work do you prefer your teacher to:			31	55	14
	8 years		31	52	17
	9 years		36	52	12
	10 years		33	53	14
	11 years		29	58	13
	12 years		20	61	19
	AVERAGE		31	52	17

Figure 1: The Means for the Praise Frequency Scale and the Praise Spotlight Scale for Each of the Age Levels in Years.

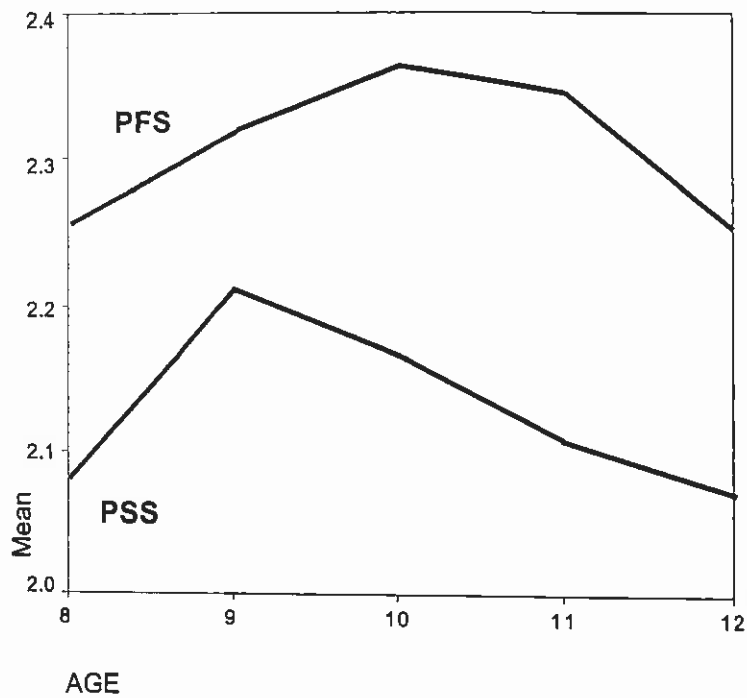
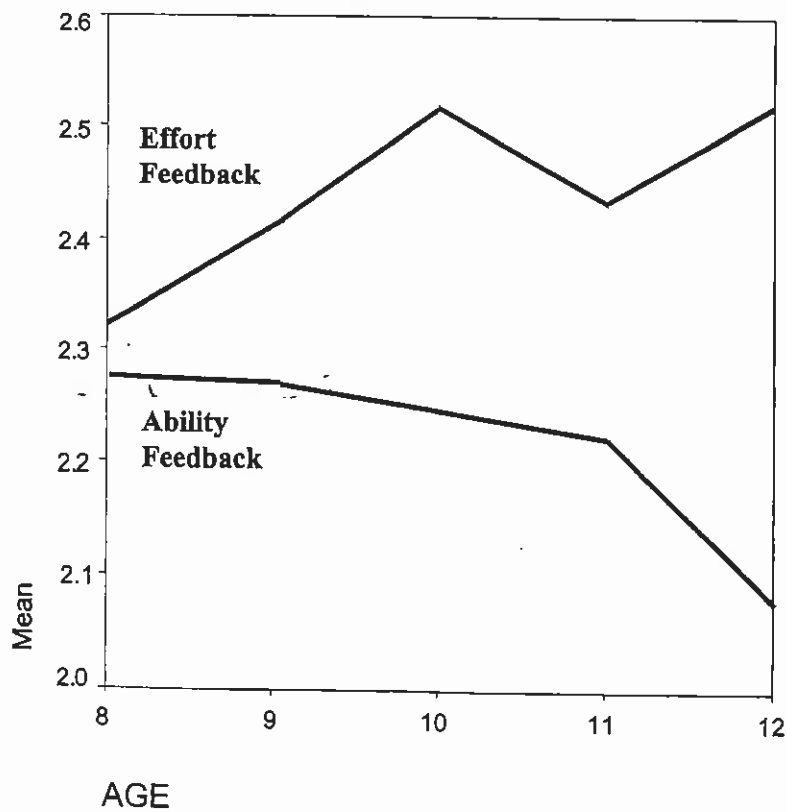


Figure 2: The Means for Effort Feedback and Ability Feedback for Each of the Age Levels in Years.



Spotlight Scale. There were no significant gender differences. However, the results for age indicated significant quadratic effects for both scales. The results were $F=3.94$, $df=1,713$, $p=.048$ for PFS and $F=4.90$, $df=1,731$, $p=0.03$ for PSS. A graph showing the means for both scales is presented in Figure 1.

Chi Squared analyses were undertaken to investigate gender and age differences for Preference for Effort or Ability Feedback. Significant gender ($ChiSq=20.0$, $df=1$, $p<.001$) and age ($ChiSq=10.7$, $df=4$, $p=.03$) differences were found indicating that more boys (22%) preferred to receive ability feedback than girls (10%) and that more younger children than older children preferred to receive ability feedback. Some 26% of 8 year olds preferred ability feedback to effort feedback compared with only 12% and 17 % of 11 and 12 year olds respectively.

Lastly, two ANOVAs using linear contrasts for age and scores on Item 3 (Frequency of Effort Feedback) and Item 4 (Frequency of Ability Feedback) respectively were undertaken to test Schunk's (1991) hypothesis that students' need for effort feedback declines with time while the need for ability feedback increases with time. Both linear contrasts were significant but in the opposite direction to what Schunk predicted. The results are graphed in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION

Teacher praise is widely viewed by elementary teachers as a desirable mechanism to reward and reinforce students' positive behaviours and academic achievement. However, little research has investigated how elementary students would like to be praised. The initial aim of this study was to develop a valid and reliable instrument to measure elementary students' preferences for teacher praise. This was accomplished with the Preference for Teacher Praise (PTP) which measures three constructs. Two of the scales measuring these constructs have moderate reliability and construct validity as assessed by factor analysis, while the third construct is represented as a single item.

The results for items 1 to 4 indicated that elementary students have similar preferences as to how often they would like to be praised. In terms of how frequently the students preferred to be praised, some 91% of students wanted to be praised either, often or sometimes while on average only 9% reported that they never wanted praise. Interestingly, the students preferred to be praised most often for trying hard or putting in effort rather than for having good ability, with 50% responding with Often for effort feedback and only 35% responding with Often for ability feedback. There were no differences in how often students thought they should be praised for academic achievement (94 % responded with often or sometimes) as opposed to good behaviour (92 % responded with often or sometimes). This finding is in contrast to high school students where a marked difference between wanting to be praised for achievement (80% and

79%) as opposed to good behaviour (46% and 33%) has been reported (Elwell & Tiberio, 1994; Sharp, 1985). This suggests that as students develop they still wish to be praised for achievement but not for behaviour. The increased importance of peer relationships and peer feedback regarding behaviour may be hypothesised as contributing factors. It can be postulated that as students grow, peer praise for behaviour becomes more important than teacher praise. However, it should be noted that good behaviour was not specifically defined and could have been interpreted differently by the two groups of students responding to the item.

The age analysis of the Praise Frequency Scale indicated a quadratic effect suggesting that the need for praise increased from age 8 to 10 and then declined to the same level by age 12. This suggests that both younger and older elementary school students want to be praised less frequently overall than 10 or 11 year olds. This finding contradicts the notion that younger children want to be praised frequently for doing good work or behaving well. The students wanting the highest amount of praise were the students in Years 4 and 5 indicating that this is a phase of development where students are looking for reassurance and recognition from their teachers.

The finding that a large majority (84%) of the students surveyed in this study preferred to be praised for trying hard than for ability is significant. Firstly it contradicts the notion that ability feedback has kudos and is sought after by most students and secondly, it creates a paradox for enhancing students' academic self-concepts using teacher feedback. Craven, Marsh and Debus (1991, p.18) noted that "research emphasises competency as the dominant source of self-concept because results suggest that praise for ability is most valued". Consequently, it appears that providing ability feedback may be one way to develop and enhance self-concepts yet students would rather receive effort feedback. This finding does not suggest that students do not want to receive any ability feedback at all but it might be one reason for the decline in reading and maths self-concepts as children progress through elementary school, particularly in the evaluative/comparative component (I am good at reading, I get good marks in math) of self-concept (Burnett, 1996). Students may need to hear that they have good abilities and are good at things in order to develop a positive competency self-concept but this type of feedback is not preferred by students and hence may be discarded and not listened to or internalized.

It should be noted that not all of the research supports the use of ability feedback in the primary classroom. It may well be that students are intuitively aware of the negative impact that ability feedback has on their behaviour and responding accordingly. Mueller and Dweck (1998) conducted a series of six studies with fifth grade students aged 9 to 11 years and found that students provided with ability feedback (a) were performance rather than learning orientated, (b) reported low enjoyment of tasks after a failure, (c) attributed failure to not being smart, (d) had poor performance after a failure, (e) lied about their results after

encountering failure, and (f) viewed ability as an entity and not malleable. Mueller and Dweck strongly advocated the use of effort feedback over ability feedback because of the negative effect of ability feedback especially after students encountered a failure experience.

Age and gender differences were also found for item 5, which measured preference for ability or effort feedback. Younger students (particularly 8 year olds) preferred to receive ability feedback than older students. Additionally, 90% of all girls involved in the study preferred effort feedback compared with 78% of boys. Items 3 and 4 also measured preferred frequency of effort and ability feedback respectively. On the basis of Schunk's (1991) hypothesis students' preference for effort feedback was expected to decline with age while their preference for ability feedback should increase with age. Contrary findings were found in this study indicating that students' preference for effort feedback increased with age while preference for ability feedback decreased with age. Schunk (1996) cited research indicating that beginning around 9 years and continuing to age 12 students learn to differentiate between the concepts of effort and ability and by adolescence they have distinct conceptions of effort and ability. The results of this study suggest that by 9 years the students appeared to understand the differences between the two concepts to the extent that they were able to express differential preferences. The decline in preference for ability feedback may be attributed to the fact that the peer consequences of being identified by your teacher as being smart are negative and increase with age. Additionally, students' preference for effort feedback may well increase because students perceive that it does not have concomitant negative consequences from peers.

The results for each of the Praise Spotlight Scale items were remarkably consistent with the average results indicating that 31% of students wanted to be praised loudly and publicly, 52% wanted to be praised quietly and individually and 17% wanted their teacher to say nothing at all. The finding that the majority of students (69%) did not wish to be praised publicly supports the notion that not all students want to be praised publicly and that some students may in fact find public praise uncomfortable or even punishing, particularly if peers use what the teachers has said

to belittle or bully the student out of class time. These findings may be accounted for by that fact that being praised in public highlights that the targeted student is better than the other students. The "tall poppy syndrome" has been written about within the Australian context (Feather, 1998) and involves cutting down anyone who is believed to be better than the rest. Finally, it should be noted that the age pattern for the means on the Praise Spotlight Scale was quadratic and similar to the results for the Praise Frequency Scale, except that 9 year olds rather than 10 and 11 year olds were the age group that wanted to be praised loudly the most. This finding supports the previously expressed notion that students in Years 4 and 5 are looking for reassurance and recognition from their teachers.

Implications for Classroom Interaction

The results of this study indicated that nearly all of the elementary students who participated wanted to be praised equally for academic achievement and good behaviour. However, most said they wanted to be praised privately on an individual basis for the effort they put into their work rather than for their ability. Contrary to Schunk's (1991) hypothesis, students' preference for effort feedback actually increased with age while their preference for ability feedback decreased with age providing further evidence that ability feedback is not preferred. The findings also suggested that not all elementary students want to be praised in the same way but teachers would fulfil the majority of students' preferences if they praised students individually for their efforts. Additionally, it should be remembered that some students reported that they never wanted to be praised and would rather that their teacher said nothing when they achieved or behaved appropriately. Finally the findings of this study leave the status of ability feedback as a self-concept enhancer and useful strategy in limbo. Further research is needed to investigate why students do not prefer ability feedback to effort feedback. It seems that having teachers tell students publicly that they are good, clever, or smart at something is not preferred by most elementary students and may have subsequent adverse consequences.

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