Praise: A School-Wide Positive Behavioral Support Tool

Ms. Janeen R. Gardner and Dr. Brittany L. Hott

Praise is a free, highly effective practice that has the potential to increase both academic and behavioral progress (Hott, Isbell, & Walker, 2015; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). This article presents a case study from a general education Biology classroom that incorporated “shout-out cards” as a component of the school-wide positive behavioral support plan. Use of formal praise increased student work completion, academic progress, and positive behaviors. Suggestions and forms are included as exemplars for practitioners.

Meet Pablo
* Pablo is a student who recently returned to high school upon release from a juvenile detention center. He has a troubled past that has led him to a felony attached to his record by the age of sixteen. He returned to his zone high school weighed down with familial instability, the experience of consequences due to poor decisions, and a thirst for positive recognition. Pablo spends his first days back to school seemingly asleep resting his head on his desk, ignoring the demands of his teachers to pick up his head and complete his assignments. If pushed to his limit, he responds by using profane language and/or walking out. He is indifferent to discipline, threats, or the demands of authority figures.

One day the science teacher, who had Pablo for the second year in a row, acknowledges Pablo completing his warm-up for the first time in class through a ‘Skeeter Shout-out’ card. Pablo had completed the warm-up and then proceeded to carry out his usual routine of pretending to be asleep. His science teacher noted the seemingly insignificant behavior and decided to send Pablo a note acknowledging the accomplishment by noting the progress and great potential he has as a student. After receiving the ‘Skeeter Shout-out’ card, Pablo returned to his science teacher, nearly at a loss for words, but acknowledging and thanking his teacher for her words of encouragement. It was as if he hadn’t ever received a compliment or at least hadn’t received one in a very long time. In addition to returning to class the following days, ready to learn and complete his work, he had a new respect and admiration for his science teacher.

Praise and Inclusive Classrooms

Today’s classrooms encompass a wide range of learners. These learners come from a multitude of backgrounds, from troubled to distinguished. They vary in their style of learning as well as level of learning. These various backgrounds and styles intermingle to create a diverse classroom community. Therefore, classrooms are designed to be an inclusive setting (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). However, teachers are challenged to meet the needs of the different learners in a structured systematic way so that students are comfortably challenged and walk away having gained knowledge in an environment that is safe for both social and emotional development (Sutherland, 2000).

Though diversity is the reigning commonality among classrooms, equally, students who feel supported in a positive environment perform at a higher standard (Hott, Walker, & Brigham, 2014). Many times, teachers find it difficult to notice the positive because there is a lot going on at any given moment (Hott & Walker, 2012). If a student is hindering the learning process, it is easiest to call attention to and extinguish that behavior. In a planned, structured environment, disruptive behaviors are most apparent. Often, misbehaviors can be avoided by being proactive in acknowledging the positive no matter how small and seemingly insignificant (Vo, Sutherland, & Conroy, 2000). Intra-school correspondence from teacher to student, such as the ‘Skeeter Shout-out’ card, is one school’s way of communicating positive feedback.

The ‘Skeeter Shout-out’ card can in a way be classified as a form of positive recognition that is both tangible and intangible. Tangible in that students are extrinsically motivated by receiving a note sometime during the school day sent from one of their teachers, acknowledging a positive behavior that was recognized. It is a source of encouragement and praise that a student can look back on for as long he or she chooses. As an intangible reward, praise and recognition is important to the growth and development of all students (Vo et al., 2000). It contributes to their health and well-being as well as helps develop self-esteem and a positive outlook. ‘Skeeter Shout-out’ cards need not take the place
of frequent positive feedback within the classroom. It is a form of recognition that says to a student that they are seen and that they are important as an individual. Sometimes that simple recognition is all it takes to get a student on track to success.

**Shout-Out Cards**
A “shout-out card” is a card created for use school-wide that allows a teacher to recognize a student. The design of the card can take on the characteristics of the campus. Teachers can set aside a few moments of time to create a thoughtful response recognizing a positive behavior in a student. A teacher can set up a weekly quota goal of his or her choosing to, over time, recognize each student, or can use the card regularly for a student to encourage growth and improvement. The card is placed in the box of one who handles distribution and is sent out via student office aides to the classrooms of the students whose names are written on the cards. It is similar to receiving a post card in the mail. Many times it is the highlight of a student’s day to receive a ‘shout-out’ card from one of their teachers. Teachers can use this as a measure for noting improvement both academically and behaviorally. A sample shout-out card from Mesquite High School is seen in Figure 1.

Individual students can make progress toward academic and behavior goals through the support of their teachers in each of their classes. Teachers can come together and identify common goals that an individual student can work toward. With each teacher periodically noting the student’s progress through the use of the correspondence system, the student can experience a supportive environment that encourages academic and behavioral improvement.

Common goals among teachers used for an individual student is one method by which ‘Shout-out’ cards can be used to measure improvement. Another method is by individual teachers establishing a set of goals for one or multiple students. Figure 2 displays a sample goals chart.

After sending out the card, the teacher takes note of the student’s behavior in class in the following days and determines whether there was a positive change, negative change, or no change at all in behavior as it pertains to the set of goals established for the student. The teacher may choose to chart progress towards student goals. A simple recording chart is provided in Figure 3.

Progress toward each goal can be denoted with a (+) or (-) in the space corresponding with each established goal. One can also track the general improvement of students, as cards are sent out weekly to the given set of students for that particular week. Place an ‘X’ or check mark on the day that you sent out the card and denote the progress made by each student.

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**Figure 1. Shout-out Card**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front</th>
<th>Back</th>
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| Mesquite High School  
300 E. Davis  
Mesquite, Texas 75149 |
| **Skeeter Shout Out!**  
Model Respect, Honor Learning, Shared Responsibility…  
You represent the Skeeter Family! |

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**Mesquite High School**
300 E. Davis
Mesquite, Texas 75149
**Figure 2. Sample Student Goals Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Goal #1</th>
<th>Goal #2</th>
<th>Goal #3</th>
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**Figure 3. Sample Student Goals Progress Chart**

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<th>Shout-out Card Sent</th>
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<th>Shout-out Card Sent</th>
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(+): improvement toward goal behavior
(-): behavior negatively affected
(blank): no change
Extrinsic motivation for making progress toward academic and behavioral goals moves to intrinsic motivation through the use of self-monitoring. Self-monitoring allows a student to actively take personal responsibility for academic and behavior choices. In this way, the student can monitor his goal behavior that can be easily observed and recorded. Once the student achieves successful implementation of the academic and/or behavioral goal, self-monitoring gradually fades. The desired behavior should ultimately be maintained by the student independently.

Pablo’s Progress

The Biology teacher reports that Pablo continues to excel in her class making progress towards state Biology standards. Pablo is

The charts used for monitoring progress can be created by inserting a table using a computer word processing program. The number of columns and rows created for the chart are determined by the number of students a teacher chooses to monitor, as well as the days chosen to monitor progress. A sample weekly tracking form is provided in Figure 4.

Teachers monitoring specific students for behavioral and/or academic progress can begin by sending four cards, one each week for a month. Progress, whether positive, negative, or no progress at all can be noted and a quick reassessment of the student’s goals can be made.

There are three avenues that a teacher can choose upon noting progress toward the student’s goals. A teacher can continue to monitor the same goals, change the goals monitored, or move toward self-monitoring.

When a student has successfully made progress toward the established academic or behavioral goal, teacher-monitoring can transition to student self-monitoring of goals, or newly established goals (Hott, Walker, & Brigham, 2014). Rapport has been established with the student. Therefore, the student feels supported and recognized by his teacher. Students who feel supported by their teachers, experience a more positive classroom environment (Hott & Limberg, 2014). ‘Shout-out’ cards provide students with an opportunity to be recognized. Academic and behavioral progress toward established goals can be monitored as well. Extrinsic motivation for making progress toward academic and behavioral goals moves to intrinsic motivation through the use of self-monitoring. Self-monitoring allows a student to actively take personal responsibility for academic and behavior choices. In this way, the student can monitor his goal behavior that can be easily observed and recorded. Once the student achieves successful implementation of the academic and/or behavioral goal, self-monitoring gradually fades. The desired behavior should ultimately be maintained by the student independently.

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**Table 4. Sample Weekly Student Tracking Form**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>T</th>
<th>W</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Shout-out card sent</td>
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<td>Shout-out card sent</td>
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scheduled to participate in end of course assessments and is expected to pass. After the success in the Biology course, Pablo’s other teachers increased the use of praise and began formally collecting data to monitor Pablo’s behavioral progress. Pablo is currently passing all of his classes. Further, according to the Assistant Principal who handles shout-out cards for the school, Pablo has received significantly fewer disciplinary referrals and his grades are improving. Pablo is increasingly productive and making steady progress.

* Note: Student name and some identifying characteristics were changed to maintain confidentiality.

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References


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