

Backdoor Praise: A New Strategy for the Teacher's Toolbox

Cindy Campbell

Southeastern University

Abstract: Backdoor praise (BDP) is praise that is simultaneously delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments. Outside of this author's work, there is no research on this type of praise. This article conveys the findings of two case studies in which 11 teachers were observed and interviewed about their perceptions of BDP. Across the two studies, 55 of 58 incidents of BDP resulted in positive reactions from the students, including increased participation and reduced off-task behavior. Three students' reactions were negative. The participating teachers reported positive effects, including "finding the good" in their students and decreasing negative comments and reprimands.

Keywords: Praise, Teacher Perceptions, Teacher Strategy

Introduction

Research has consistently noted the positive effects of using praise in the classroom, whether for student recognition, behavior management, or both. The effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of the type of praise given has also received attention in research, with many studies comparing praise comments related to a student's intelligence, academic ability, effort, use of strategies, thinking process, and perseverance. Without exception, research has focused on an insistence that praise comments must be immediate, specific, and directed toward students if they are to garner positive responses from the recipients. An alternative approach is to see how students react to praise that is simultaneously delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments. This type of praise, dubbed "backdoor praise" or BDP, is subtle and may surprise students because it is unexpected. In this article, an argument is made for the inclusion of BDP as a valid form of praise that teachers should add to their toolboxes.

Background on Backdoor Praise

"Backdoor praise" in the classroom involves positive recognition that is delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments (Campbell, 2017). While it is a form of praise, its purpose can also be to engage or re-engage off-task or disinterested students during instruction. Instead of reprimanding, or worse, making sarcastic comments about, a student for off-task behavior, backdoor praise notes something positive about the student – a productive comment the student made earlier in the day, correct work shown on a math problem, an interesting anecdote shared by the student. The teacher's comments are said "in passing" so the off-task student will be less likely to receive it negatively and more likely to

SRATE Journal

A peer-reviewed publication of the
Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE)
2026, Volume 35, Issue 1
SRATE.org



re-engage in the class. The term “backdoor” relates to the unexpectedness of the comment; because the praise is delayed, indirect, and embedded in teacher comments, it “sneaks in through the backdoor” to surprise a student.

Examples of BDP include: “Remember at the beginning of class how Josie checked her answer by multiplying? That’s what you’ll want to do in these next word problems...” “Michael brought up a good point yesterday in how we’re seeing more nuances in the main character. Let’s read further and keep an eye out for that so we can discuss the author’s goal and maybe predict what’s to come.” “Just like Landon explained a few minutes ago, the increase of heat is a factor in making volcanoes erupt. What other factors might be involved?” “At recess, Monique was telling me about how she spotted one of our vocabulary words when she was at McDonald’s. Has anyone else seen any of our words outside of class?”

Backdoor praise comments recognize students’ prior work or contributions to learning but can also effectively be used for behavior management. Josie, mentioned in one of the examples above, is a top student who is easily bored; the teacher’s reference to Josie’s work is used to re-engage her. Michael does not like to read, so a subtle comment from his teacher about his contribution to the class discussion is used to spark his interest in reading. Landon is an ESE student who struggles with understanding textbook content but loves watching science videos at home; his teacher’s comments serve to encourage him to participate more. Monique is often off task or misbehaving in class, but hearing her name in a positive way through BDP refocuses her attention on academics. Because BDP is subtle, older students may be less likely to feel embarrassed by its use. In addition, because of the unexpectedness of BDP, students are not specifically doing something in an “If...then” scenario with the specific goal of earning praise, although that could happen with some students.

Current Research on Praise

Dweck’s (2007a, 2007 b, 2015) work on fixed and growth mindset is often cited in others’ studies of the effects of praise in the classroom. Students with a fixed mindset view their intelligence, abilities, and talents as innate and unchangeable; those with a growth mindset recognize that intelligence, abilities, and talents can be developed through effort and practice. The author wrote, “As educators, almost everything we say to our students sends a message. Some messages enhance students’ motivation, but other messages undermine it” (Dweck, 2007a, p. 6). Dweck (2015) also noted that certain types of praise can stifle students’ beliefs that they can “grow their brains” (para. 2).

Praising a student’s intelligence (“Wow, you’re so smart!”) can provide an immediate bump in pride, but when that student does not continue to achieve at the same level, that pride bubble is quickly burst (Dweck 2007b). Although Dweck and others promote the use of effort praise (“I can tell you worked hard on this.”) over academic praise, she warns of the problems with giving effort praise when no learning has occurred. “It’s good that the students tried, but it’s not good that they’re not learning” (para. 6). Instead, the phrasing of the praise should be focused on overcoming obstacles and setbacks, asking students what they want to try next. The author’s recommendations are for teachers and parents as well, reminding them to reflect on how they react to their own challenges and whether they adopt a growth mindset.

Gardiner (2014) looked at praise through the lens of motivation. Certain types of praise foster extrinsic motivation in students (i.e., “What do I get if I do this?”), to the point

where “the only motivation most students get from rewards is the motivation to get more rewards” (p. 40). Gardiner was not alone in warning that praise can be perceived as a way of controlling a student’s behavior and that effort-based praise could be inferred as meaning the recipient lacks intelligence or ability. In some cases, students may see praise as judgment, and although intended to be positive judgment, “it is still a judgment” (p. 41). Pink (2009, as cited in Gardiner, 2014) posited that a reward (i.e., praise) that comes after a behavior or completed task is preferred since “the student was not working toward the reward during the performance of the task” (p. 42). Deci (1995, as cited in Gardiner, 2014) work on motivation, writing that rewards are less harmful when they are not controlling in nature and are general comments on a student’s good work.

Xu et al. (2024) concluded in their article that teachers should find a balance between the use of process and person praise, noting there is legitimate need for both in specific circumstances. The authors also looked at the motivational impact from praise received. When students believe their increased effort indicates higher ability, they showed mastery responses following effort-based praise. Those who believe more effort equates with lower ability (i.e., they must not be smart because they have to take longer) “exhibited helpless responses” (para. 7) to effort-based praise. The recommendation was to use both effort and person praise, with slightly more of the former, for the best results.

A single article on behavior-specific praise focused on the method of giving private praise to those students who are shy or have potential triggers when publicly acknowledged. Pérez et al. (2023) wrote about the use of behavior-specific praise (BSP) in the classroom and at home, but of interest was the anecdote of a child, Ana, who “was at moderate risk for externalizing and high risk for internalizing behavior patterns” (p. 83). In other words, this seventh-grade student’s math teacher determined she did not like recognition in front of her peers and that receiving it might cause her to shut down. The authors noted that private conversations about progress worked better for her and that, in general, students’ preferences for private versus public acknowledgment can change based on the situation. Recommendations for teachers include self-evaluations of their use of BSP, general, praise, and specific praise and their effect on students. An additional idea is to get feedback from students about praise: what they like and do not like.

Dunne (2023) noted that only praise that is “a spontaneous expression of admiration” (p. 237) is motivational to its recipient. This author also noted the recommendation of effort versus academic praise, but for a specific reason: control over the situation and their learning. Like other authors cited already, Dunne notes the need to foster students’ intrinsic motivation – the joy they feel when they have worked hard, made improvements, or succeeded at a task. Dunne also states that students will be the most motivated about goals they set for themselves; the teacher’s role is to encourage students to believe in themselves and provide guidance when needed.

The ineffectiveness of some effort praise is intensified at the secondary level, when the school culture is turned toward academic success, not just effort. Amemiya and Wang (2018) recommend the use of process praise, in which “both effort level and effective strategies are praised” (p. 200), to promote students’ longer-term resilience to reach their goals. Like Dweck, Amemiya and Wang noted that some effort praise can be misinterpreted, giving students the underlying message that, although they tried, they did not succeed. In addition, there is a risk of minority students feeling stereotyped by the effort-focused feedback they receive, inferring their teachers had low expectations of them (Lawrence et

al., 2011, as cited in Amemiya & Wang, 2018). A third negative on effort praise is that students who are praised for working a long time on a task may be deterred from doing so again because “the amount of time and work needed to be successful may seem too costly” (Amemiya & Wang, 2018, p. 201).

The article by White et al. (2023) was not focused on individual praise like the other works reviewed here. Instead, the authors presented their research on whole-group sensitivity toward praise, comments, and criticisms from racial “ingroups” and “outgroups.” The study involved surveys of people identifying as European American (EA), African American (AA), and Latin American (LA). While there was an undertone in the article about racial tension between the three groups, particularly between EA and AA groups, in general, EA and LA people were more accepting of praise from outgroup members than ingroup members. This was especially true for European Americans, and the authors posited that it may be due to a fear of being identified as a white supremacist. In their conclusion, the authors noted that criticism received by outgroup members were received more negatively, “primarily because they question the good intentions of outgroup critics” (p. 376). The applicability of this research to teachers’ use of praise in the classroom is the recognition that praise (and criticism) needs to be authentic and the relationship between teacher and student real for the comments to be positively received.

Reavis et al. (2018) reported on research comparing the effects of person-focused praise on adults. They clarified the difference between someone being a “hard worker” (person-focused) and someone described as “working hard” (process- or effort-focused). Their research found that people who hear the latter description are more likely to keep trying, whereas they may interpret person-focused descriptions as “threats to the self” (p. 117).

Fecser (2015) also reported on how many students need to feel in control of their environment, especially those identified with behavioral or mental health needs. Students who have experienced trauma are often negatively reactive to the pressures from authority figures like teachers to conform to do what they are told. Some students will challenge authority by minimally complying at most, and teachers need to understand that this is the students’ way of compromising while not giving up all their control. The “normal” forms of praise given to typical students may backfire. Students who have experienced trauma may interpret praise as an attempt to manipulate or control them. Contrary to expectations, their response to praise may be to engage in misbehavior as a way of controlling their environment.

The lone non-school-related article by Urquhart (2001) focused on workplace acknowledgments, both those that motivate and those that feel patronizing to the worker. Given that schools are workplaces for students, and the teachers are the “boss” in the classroom, Urquhart’s comments and advice transfer well. The author noted that “most people work for reasons other than a paycheck...or an award” (para. 3). Companies with “an attitude of appreciation that is a routine part of every day” are more likely to have employees who “at their best because their standards of excellence are their own” (para. 4).

Research Conducted

In a case study by Campbell (2017), three preservice teachers, one each at the elementary (fifth grade), middle school (seventh grade math), and high school (tenth grade

English) level in public schools in Central Florida, were observed for baseline data on their use of praise. The participants selected a pseudonym for the study. Each observation was 30 to 50 minutes. Data collected included their use of general and specific praise as well as whether they used BDP, as seen in Table 1. In an immediate post-observation conference, they learned about BDP, were provided examples of phrasing, and were asked to include BDP when they could in their classroom. Each preservice teacher was observed twice more, with the observer gathering tallies and time stamps of BPD use, noting the length of time of the positive effects of BDP in each student receiving it. The effects of BDP lasted anywhere from 3 to 27 minutes, with results affected by the time the BDP was given (e.g., an activity or class period ended) or what the student or teacher did afterward (e.g., activity changes from whole group to independent work). After each observation, they reviewed the data collected and participated in a recorded interview about their comfort with using BDP and their students' reactions to it.

Kathryn, the high school English preservice teacher, used BDP with groups of students who were analyzing Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. She found that when she used BDP to recognize one group's intriguing insights, other groups would increase their conversations and call the teacher over in the apparent hope of earning BDP as well. Her overall use of general and specific praise did not increase to an extent worth noting for this study.

In the middle school math classroom, preservice teacher Dawn said BDP worked well with many students. One boy became more engaged in helping other students, something he had never done before. BDP was not effective with a girl who tended to call out and misbehave; when she received BDP, it stoked her to call out more. Dawn determined that quiet praise worked better for that student.

Ruth, the preservice teacher in the fifth-grade classroom, stated that BDP worked with all but one of her students; one boy with an identified behavior disorder gave no reaction to BDP (this incident is marked as negative in Table 1 below). By finding ways to use BDP to get off-task students re-engaged, she realized she was using fewer reprimands and a less-negative tone with her students. Ruth's comment matched the observer's findings: She increased her use of specific praise, from eight incidents of use in the baseline observation to an average of 22 in each of the other two observations.

Table 1. Preservice teachers' use of BDP.

Preservice Teachers		General Praise	Specific Praise	Backdoor Praise
Kathryn High School English	Baseline	5	0	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	11 Ave. 5-6 per obs.	2 Ave. 1 per obs.	Pos – 3 Neg – 0
Dawn Middle School Math	Baseline	15	0	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	46 Ave. 23 per obs.	11 Ave. 5-6 per obs.	Pos – 12 Neg – 1
Ruth Elementary School 5 th Grade	Baseline	27	8	Pos – 2 Neg – 0
	Obs. 1 & 2	35 Ave. 17-18 per obs.	44 Ave. 22 per obs.	Pos – 11 Neg – 1

A follow-up case study was conducted in 2024 at a one public high school in Central Florida. Eight teachers, representing Social Studies (2), Science (2), English (2), Math (1), and Art (1), volunteered to participate in BDP research. Like the 2017 study, each teacher was observed the first time with no information about what the researcher was studying. Each observation was 50 minutes (one class period), and length of time of effectiveness of BDP ranged from 2 to 36 minutes, depending on when the praise was given during the class period. Data were collected and shared immediately following the observations, and each teacher agreed to be observed twice more using BDP with their students, as seen in Table 2. All participants chose a pseudonym for the study.

Table 2. High school teachers' use of BDP

HS Teachers		General Praise	Specific Praise	Backdoor Praise
Ambrose Art	Baseline	14	5	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	17 Ave. 8-9 per obs.	15 Ave. 7-8 per obs.	Pos – 3 Neg – 0
Christopher Social Studies	Baseline	7	2	Pos – 1 Neg – 0
	Obs. 1 & 2	18 Ave. 9 per obs.	18 Ave. 9 per obs.	Pos – 3 Neg – 0
Crowe Social Studies	Baseline	18	2	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	17 Ave. 8-9 per obs.	0	Pos – 5 Neg – 0
Farmer Science	Baseline	5	0	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	15 Ave. 7-8 per obs.	3 Ave. 1-2 per obs.	Pos – 3 Neg – 1
Kelley Science	Baseline	1	1	Pos – 1 Neg – 0
	Obs. 1 & 2	3 Ave. 1-2 per obs.	3 Ave. 1-2 per obs.	Pos – 5 Neg – 0
Miller English	Baseline	10	10	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	4 Ave. 2 per obs.	4 Ave. 2 per obs.	Pos – 2 Neg – 0
Ver Nooy Math	Baseline	13	13	Pos – 1 Neg – 0
	Obs. 1 & 2	3 Ave. 1-2 per obs.	3 Ave. 1-2 per obs.	Pos – 5 Neg – 0
Winrey English	Baseline	4	4	None
	Obs. 1 & 2	1 Ave. 0-1 per obs.	1 Ave. 0-1 per obs.	Pos – 3 Neg – 0

Overall, the use of BDP was found to be a positive experience for the teachers who participated in the study. The Art teacher increased her use of specific praise as well, commenting that many of her students sought additional feedback on their work after anyone received either specific praise or BDP. When the teacher praised a few students who

often did not put much effort into their work, she said their energy in class to get more done was noticeable.

Both Social Studies teachers and the Math teacher were naturally intentional about engaging all students through praise, and two of them each gave one backdoor praise during the baseline observation. They all said that using BDP got some of their quieter students to participate more and request help or feedback. The two English teachers' personalities and teaching approaches were effective yet quite different; one was effervescent with a talkative class while the other was more business-like with students who knew to raise their hands to comment on the content. Both, however, stated that the use of BDP was a strategy they liked using to subtly compliment and engage more students.

Of the two Science teachers, one found BDP to be a natural addition to her repertoire of engagement strategies. She circulated the room throughout each of the three observations, interacting positively with the students and easily able to incorporate BDP during her second and third observations. The other teacher admittedly struggled with feeling prepared for teaching in general. She said BDP was difficult to use "when there is so much else we have to do" when teaching. She agreed that the idea of BDP was good, but she would have to be intentional to remember that it was another way to praise students. Her class had the only incident where BDP was not successful. She had used it initially with a student, but then she reprimanded that same student in front of the class a few minutes later. The student's response was a combination of talking back and then not wanting to complete the day's assignment.

Relating Current Praise to Backdoor Praise

Researchers, including this one, agree that authentic, positive, effort-based praise works well as a motivator for students. Dweck (2015), Gardiner (2014), Amemiya and Wang (2018), and Reavis et al. (2018) all recommend effort-based praise over person- or academic-based praise. Pérez et al. (2023) included an example of how quiet praise is effective for certain students, and Urquhart (2001) noted how praise is perceived in the adult workplace.

The author's literature search identified no published studies specifically examining praise that combines all three characteristics, yet BDP addresses all of the benefits of using praise in the classroom. Because of how BDP is delivered through embedded teacher comments, the praise is automatically effort- or process-based. Its delivery is subtle so as to (hopefully) not embarrass a student, but, rather, serve to recognize class contributions. As the fifth-grade preservice teacher in Campbell (2017) found, BDP can be used to replace reprimands and negative comments, and as many of the high school teachers saw, BDP may engage otherwise disinterested students in the learning.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Study

Many classroom teachers are undoubtedly using various amounts of what is labeled here as backdoor praise. They are doing any combination of delayed, indirect, and embedded praise in their instruction. The author's literature search identified no published studies specifically examining praise that combines all three characteristics. While the use of immediate, direct, and specific praise is well established as an effective strategy for

encouraging students, evidence from studies described in this article suggests that backdoor praise is also a strategy more teachers and preservice teachers can and should employ.

Preservice teachers learn in their methods classes about the positive effects of praise, and second-career classroom teachers who may have received little to no pedagogy on why, when, and how to use praise are building their repertoire of effective strategies. Both groups would benefit from knowing that using delayed, indirect, and embedded comments is another strategy that can be used to encourage and re-engage students. The results of the two studies reported here suggest that BDP is an effective way to praise students. Additional and more extensive classroom-based research is needed to validate the case study findings reported here.

References

- Amemiya, J., & Wang, M.-T. (2018). Why effort praise can backfire in adolescence. *Child Development Perspectives*, 12(3), 199-203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12284>
- Campbell, C. J. (2017). *A case study of preservice teachers' perceptions of their use of "backdoor praise" in the classroom* (Publication No. 10599869) [Doctoral dissertation, Southeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/case-study-preservice-teachers-perceptions-their/docview/1957434247/se-2>
- Dunne, C. (2023). Praise: What actually works. *British Columbia Medical Journal*, 65(7), 237. <https://bcmj.org/editorials/praise-what-actually-works>
- Dweck, C. S. (2007a). Boosting achievement with messages that motivate. *Education Canada*, 47(2), 6-10. https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2007-v47-n2-Dweck.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Dweck, C. S. (2007b). The perils and promises of praise. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 34-39. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-perils-and-promises-of-praise-summer-2008>
- Dweck, C. (2015, September 22). Carol Dweck revisits the 'growth mindset.' *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-carol-dweck-revisits-the-growth-mindset/2015/09?cmp=cpc-google-ew-growth%20mindset&ccid=growth%20mindset&ccag=growth%20mindset&cckw=%2Bgrowth%20%2Bmindset&cccw=content%20ad&gclid=Cj0KEQiAnvfDBRCXrabLI6-6t-0BEiQAW4SRUM7nekFnoTxc675qBMSJycFgwERohguZWVmNDcSUg5gaAk3I8P8HAQ>
- Fecser, M. E. (2015). Classroom strategies for the traumatized, oppositional students. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 24(1), 20-24. [https://icoaose.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Classroom%20Strategies%20for%20Traumatized,%20OppositionalStudents\(1\).pdf](https://icoaose.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Classroom%20Strategies%20for%20Traumatized,%20OppositionalStudents(1).pdf)
- Gardiner, S. (2014). Stop the pay, stop the play. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(8), 39-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171409500809>
- Pérez, P., Gil, H., Artola, A., Royer, D. J., & Lane, K. L. (2023). Behavior-specific praise: Empowering teachers and families to support students in varied learning contexts. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 67(2), 83-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2023.2181303>
- Reavis, R. D., Miller, S. E., Grimes, J. A., & Fomukong, A.-N. N. M. (2018). Effort and person-focused praise: "Hard worker" has negative effects for adults after a failure. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 179(3), 117-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2018.1441801>

- Urquhart, J. (2001). Caught in the act: How to acknowledge people without turning them off. *Measuring Business Excellence*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.1108/mbe.2001.26705cab.002>
- White, K. R. G., Bray, J., Lang, J. C., McLeroy, A., Hernandez, S., & McLaughlin, C. (2023). The intergroup sensitivity effect among racial groups in the United States. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 26(2), 357-379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302211069962>
- Xu, X., Mo, L., Pan, L., & Li, Y. (2024). The “praise balance”: Uncovering the optimal recipe for mastery motivation in preschoolers. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 90, Article 101607. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101607>

About the Author

Cindy Campbell is an associate professor at Southeastern University. Her research focuses on effective strategies to ensure teachers are well prepared so their students have a positive learning experience.