HOW DOES PRAISE INFLUENCE STUDENTS’ EMOTIONS IN THE MIDST OF A CHALLENGE?

Chair: Zoe Higheagle Strong

Despite its positive surface features, adult-to-student praise is not always received positively by students. The implicit meanings embedded into different types of praise can render praise helpful, ineffective, or even detrimental for students. While many past studies have focused on links between praise and motivation, few have investigated how praise may shape students’ academic emotions. This study drew on Carol Dweck’s mindset theory to examine the emotional effects of two different types of praise: person praise (e.g., “you’re a natural!”) and process praise (e.g., “you’ve been trying some really good strategies!”). Thirty-four fifth-grade students (16 girls and 18 boys with diverse racial/ethnic identities) worked on challenging tangram puzzles on two different days. On the first day, students completed a control puzzle with no praise. On the second day, students randomly received either person or process praise at two time points. One minute into each puzzle, students rated their in-the-moment intensity of twelve discrete emotions, as well as perceived difficulty of the puzzle and value of the puzzle. Students’ beliefs about effort (e.g., effort as a tool for growth versus effort as a sign of low ability) were also measured. Analyses tested two central hypotheses: 1) students’ emotions will change significantly from an initial un-praised puzzle to a second praised puzzle, and 2) process praise will relate to more positive emotion and less negative emotion than will person praise. Exploratory analyses examined links among effort beliefs, task value, perceived difficulty, time spent on the task, and emotion. Only one emotion, nervousness, was lower during the praised puzzle than the un-praised puzzle. Praise type was not significantly associated with positive or negative emotion, and there were no gender or racial/ethnic differences in students' reported emotions. Students' beliefs about effort did show intriguing links with emotion. While hypotheses were not supported, the findings from this small-scale study shed light on promising avenues for future research. Finally, a critical third chapter suggests questions and concepts to consider in pursuing qualitative research with a more prominent social justice agenda.