

What happens when we celebrate effort in the classroom?

Chloé Valérie Matkovic

Group 4D

Rationale

This practitioner enquiry is embedded in Carol Dweck's work regarding "growth mindset" as well as a sentence from Alan McLean (2003) "the most powerful motivation for learning comes from inside" and the Scottish Government drive to close the attainment gap. How, as teachers, can we motivate pupils to achieve their full potential?

In the Modern Languages classroom, pupils can lack motivation or engagement as they navigate out of the comfort zone of their mother tongue(s). Some learners choose to stop their effort at the first obstacle they encounter. Praising their effort instead of their achievement can help pupils develop a "growth mindset" rather than a "fixed mindset" (Dweck), therefore enabling them to become more "confident individuals" which is one of the aims set out by the Curriculum for Excellence. Dweck (2007) writes that: "The wrong kind of praise creates self-defeating behaviour. The right kind motivates students to learn."

It has been suggested that developing a growth mindset can help promote self-esteem, push confidence, create a nurturing classroom environment and boost pupils' motivation (Dweck, 2010).

Aims

The aim of this enquiry is to identify what happens when teachers celebrate effort in the classroom. The aim is to determine whether praising effort has some effects on S1 pupils' motivation and engagement in the French classroom.

Methodology

This enquiry was conducted with a class of S1 pupils over a four-week period. Although all pupils participated in this inquiry, a focus group of six children was selected beforehand. The six pupils are of mixed ability: three with additional support needs and three being high achievers.

Effort was celebrated in the classroom with the use of praise (individual or as a class), stickers and merits.

It was decided to gather evidence through teacher observation: assessing pupils' work by marking jotters, observing pupils during the lesson, reflecting on the impact of praise on their motivation and engagement. However, only reflecting on observations would not prove to genuinely reflect how pupils felt as it lies within the affect, and the best way to accurately report on pupils' feelings was to give them a voice. They were asked to write on exit passes how they felt when praised for their effort. As it can be problematic for people to express their feelings, learners were reassured that they could choose not to write anything on the exit pass and that there was no right or wrong answer. As one can find themselves short of words when they want to talk about their feelings, pupils were given examples of possible "answers" they could use in order to help them pinpoint what and how they were feeling.

All these evidence-gathering methods are part of normal classroom routine and would have occurred were it not for the enquiry.

Although the methods of collecting data did not require formal ethical permissions, ethical considerations had to be taken into account. Some learners might feel embarrassed at sharing their feelings. They also might experience being singled out for being the only one who feels that way. This is why it was made clear that they could choose not to write anything, that there was no right or wrong answer and that this would have no impact on how they would be treated in the future.

Findings

The findings for the enquiry show that praising effort had a significant impact on the motivation and engagement of the focus group pupils as well as for the rest of the class.

Dweck (2010) says that having a growth mindset boosts pupils' confidence. This was also reflected in the answers from the focus group. They reported: "I feel proud of myself", "Happy that I tried", "Good because it makes me feel like I almost got it right", "I feel good about myself" and "Proud of myself, and happy and smart". Only one pupil from the focus group, a higher achiever, wrote that they felt "no different than before". These overall senses of feeling "good", "happy" or "better" was shared by the rest of the class, and only one pupil reported that they were "disappointed" when praised on effort because they wanted to have the right answer rather than try.

In observing the pupils' motivation and engagement in the class, an increase could be noted. Pupils were generally trying harder as the weeks progressed. The pupils in the focus group with additional needs were better engaged in the tasks at hand at the end of the enquiry in comparison with the work they were doing before the implementation and at the very start of the process. They did not choose to "opt out" when they faced a difficulty. On the contrary, they tried to overcome this obstacle as they knew they would be praised for trying. The three highly able pupils produced a better quality of work over the course of the research. Marking their jotters, it was clear that their answers were more detailed and they tried to produce work of a higher level, making more complex sentences in the foreign language for example.

Conclusions

From this enquiry, it can be assumed that praising effort does affect pupils' motivation and engagement in the lesson. The different praises used in the classroom affected how the pupils participated in the French class and impacted on their confidence.

However, praise should be used at the right moment and with the right pupils. Moreover, it can be argued that these findings are quite limited as this enquiry was very small-scaled: only a focus group of six pupils and a very short period of time. Implementing this over four weeks cannot provide definite answers as to the effects of praising effort. In order to have better findings, such an enquiry could be carried out over a longer period of time as it would give teachers a better grasp of its effects on pupils and would allow them to see if those effects are lasting or only temporary.

Implications for Future Practice

Conducting this enquiry allowed me to better understand the pupils in my care. I have developed better relationships with the pupils as they feel that I value their effort as much as I value their achievements, therefore creating a more nurturing classroom environment.

The enquiry process is part of what a teacher should do. Indeed, you can read in the Standards for Registration (GTCS, 2012):

2.3.2 Have knowledge and understanding of the importance of research and engagement in professional enquiry.

I feel that conducting this enquiry helped me to develop my professional practice in some ways. As Stremmel (2002: 4) writes:

The real value of engaging in teacher research at any level is that it may lead to rethinking and reconstructing what it means to be a teacher or teacher educator and, consequently change the way teachers relate to children and students.

Carrying out his enquiry allowed me to better understand how the learners in my classroom felt and allowed us –the pupils and I– to have a discussion on the ways we could continue to develop a growth mindset rather than a fixed one.

Although this enquiry was small-scaled and rather short, I feel I have gained new knowledge and skills that I can continue to develop in my future career as a teacher.

Bibliography

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