Category: Teacher & Student Interaction

Encouraging student success by incorporating a praise culture in schools

SCIREARLY

Toolkit

Successful Learning Practices for All Children to Thrive

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POLICIES AND PRACTICES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH FOR REDUCING UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN EUROPE

Red Barnet, MHPSS Collaborative

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This toolkit, “Successful Learning Practices for All Children to Thrive,” is a practical resource that shows how to create successful learning environments in classrooms, schools, and communities. It helps teachers and school leaders build effective learning spaces that improve basic skills, support struggling students, and develop children’s social and emotional skills. The toolkit is based on 20 case studies from 9 European countries, offering practical strategies that have worked in real schools.

These case studies come from primary and secondary schools across Europe that have successfully helped underachieving students and prevented early school leaving. The research was conducted in diverse schools across Portugal, Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Malta. From these schools, we gathered concrete practices that improve both academic learning and social-emotional development.

The toolkit is organised around five key areas of successful learning environments:

- Pedagogies
- Teacher and Student Interaction
- Peer Collaboration
- School – Family – Community Collaboration
- Wellbeing and Support

While each tool is placed in one of these areas, many tools work across multiple areas. For instance, “Interactive Groups” not only helps students work together but also connects with the community, supports wellbeing, and improves academic results.

It’s important to understand that the most successful schools use multiple tools together. While each tool can help on its own, the best results come from working on all five areas across the whole school. We recommend looking at your school’s current strengths and areas for improvement to help you choose the most useful tools for your situation.

This toolkit is available as an online platform in seven languages: Spanish, Portuguese, English, Finnish, Maltese, Greek, and Italian. All the tools have been carefully tested and developed through dialogic co-creation with nearly 1,000 participants in the SCIREARLY project, including school staff, students, families, and community members.

Our aim is to give educators and communities the tools they need to help every child succeed in school. By sharing successful practices from different learning environments in an accessible way, we’re working to create schools where all children can thrive, regardless of their background.

Glossary

A glossary section is essential in this toolkit to provide clear definitions of key terms and concepts, ensuring that all users, including teachers, school leaders, education experts, policymakers, and community members, can fully understand and effectively implement the successful teaching and learning practices. This section helps bridge any gaps in terminology and ensures consistent understanding, making it easier to apply the evidence-based strategies and improve educational outcomes for students.

Dialogic Teaching and Learning

Dialogic teaching and learning emphasises dialogue and quality interactions as the primary means of achieving understanding, learning and development. A dialogic approach to teaching and learning aims at creating an environment where all students, teachers and other members of the community actively engage in meaningful and respectful dialogue. Here are some of the key premises:

Ensuring that everybody's voice is valued equally, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the dialogue. This encourages diverse perspectives and ensures that all voices are heard.

Recognising and valuing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of all students and teachers. This helps to create a more inclusive and understanding learning environment.

Dialogic interactions among students, teacher-student and within the community are oriented towards transforming the sociocultural context and create optimal conditions for learning and development.

Co-constructing meaning and understanding through dialogues between students and teachers. This collaborative process helps deepen comprehension and retention of information.

Building a sense of community and mutual support among students and teachers. This principle fosters collaboration and collective responsibility for learning.

Respecting and valuing differences among students and teachers. Dialogue should celebrate diversity and use it as a resource for learning. Encouraging critical thinking and challenging everyone to think deeply and question assumptions.

Emotional Dimension

Recognising the importance of quality relationships in learning. Successful practices create a supportive environment where students and teachers feel safe, supported and confident to express their emotions and experiences.

Authentic Learning

Ensuring that the dialogue and learning are relevant to the students' and teachers' real-life experiences and contexts. This makes the learning more meaningful and applicable.

Translanguaging

When one person speaks in one language while another person responds in another.

Reception Classes

Classes where children with another mother tongue are in specialised classes where translanguaging is used to help children learn the host country language - with the intention that the children enter mainstream education as they gain language proficiency.

Encouraging student success by incorporating a praise culture in schools

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Overview:

Praise, when used in a purposeful, consistent and strategic way, has been shown to be an effective way of influencing student's beliefs about their learning and their ability to succeed and can lead to increased motivation and persistence in the face of challenges. Praise can also make students feel valued and strengthen relationships between teachers and students. However, research has also shown that teachers do not use praise very often, and even less so with older young people. Encouraging a culture in school that incorporates praise of both students and teachers can increase engagement and attendance and influence educational attainment and create an environment where students feel supported in their learning. However, the use of praise needs to be strategic, as the generic use of praise is least effective, and sometimes can have a negative effect on children. Praise differs from feedback as it concentrates on re-enforcing positive messages rather than confronting and remedying challenges.

This tool provides an introduction to creating a positive praise culture in educational settings. It is suitable for use by those working with school-aged children and young people at any stage.

Implementation Steps:

Preparation:

Be aware of different types of praise and how it can be used effectively to support engagement and learning:

1. **Generic praise.** This is where praise statements are used in a general way. Students may not know why they are receiving the praise, and sometimes attribute success to inherent personal characteristics within themselves. This is the least helpful type of praise as it does not re-enforce specific behaviour or provide learning opportunities and can become meaningless.

2. **Specific praise.** This kind of praise refers to a specific action that a student has taken, for instance, a particular behaviour. Students know exactly what kind of behaviour elicits praise and may be more likely to repeat these. This praise can refer to the processes of learning (e.g. the effort made) or about achievements (e.g. successes). Directing this kind of praise to effort generates the most effective learning experience. For example 'I really liked the way you did x, y, z'.

Implementation:

1. **Consult** with staff and students about what might work for them in terms of how they want to recieve praise. Would they prefer public displays of praise, or private words? Would they prefer verbal or written praise or opportunities for reward?

2. **Decide** specific mechanisms for praise. How will praise be delivered in your setting?

3. **Raising awareness** and supporting teachers. Undertake awareness raising across the school so that all staff are aware of the types of praise they should use, and in what circumstances. Further coaching can support teachers in their use of praising techniques.

4. **Identifying** students. Know your students and understand the context of their lives and learning. Prioritise developing supportive relationships between students and staff. Ensure all students have opportunities to recieve praise on a regular basis in a meaningful way.

5. **Develop** a strategy that can be rolled out across the school so that praise is delivered in a meaningful, consistent and effective way.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

1. Encourage school staff to compare their practices and seek peer support in praising students.

2. Monitor how often teachers are using praise and which children are recieving praise.

3. Seek feedback from teachers and students about their experiences of praise.

4. Review the praise strategy on a regular basis.

Examples and Case Studies:

Greenview Academy is a larger than average secondary school with 1720 young people aged 11-18 years, 49% female and 51% male. It is located in a semi-rural location on the edge of a city in the NorthEast of England, with students attending from a wide catchment that includes urban, semi-rural and rural areas. The majority of students are White British (82%) but there has been a recent increase in the number of students for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL). Current languages spoken by students include English, Fillipino, Urdu, Italian, Igbo, Chinese, Panjabi, Bengali, Romanian, Arabic, Albanian, Kurdish, Turkish, Portuguese, Polish, Hindi, Spanish, Polish and Swahili. Many students experience social-economic inequalities with high levels of unemployment and low average income levels, and around 70% of students are thought to be living in poverty. Attainment on entry to the school is above the national average. Seven years ago the school was judged by the UK Inspectorate Ofsted, to be failing its pupils.

Following this, a completely new model of school improvement was implemented involving changes in almost every area of the school. There are high expectations for pupils with 'no exceptions and no excuses'. Senior leaders were keen to stress that the school is not 'an exam factory' but that it is 'building the whole child' and that it is not one single change that has made a difference to raising attainment but that:

'You can have all the strategies in the world but if you haven't got the culture right, it just won't happen'

The latest inspection report noted that the school had undergone a transformation and that 'leaders have taken swift and decisive action to bring about rapid improvements across all areas of school life'.

The praise culture at Greenview Academy is something staff are visibly proud of and enact on a daily basis. Staff and students are encouraged to undertake 'random acts of kindness' to each other including writing down praise on postcards, passing them round and sending them home. Students are encouraged to talk about or show things that make them proud with a 'Proud Stall' in school weekly and certificates given. Interventions include a 'Fabulist' for year 11 pupils. This involves staff standing at the school gates with a small list of pupils and their photographs so that they can identify pupils as they come into school and congratulate them on a specific success they have had. This happens weekly, and different pupils are targeted for praise each week. Other common practices include teachers identifying pupils' work or contributions for applause in class and each week identifying a pupil for 'extra-applause' who is named on the classroom door. There are also 'Principal Praise' and 'Principal Progress' winners, English, mathematics and sports stars and 'spotted reading' prizes. Together with this there are regular celebration events for year groups and graduations at key stages.

There is a team of learning managers that are not classroom based. They have a key role in forming strong relationships with students and they are usually allocated to a particular year group cohort. Teachers are not expected to deal with behaviour issues in class, but instead implement a graded system whereby pupils are dealt with by these staff who are on duty in corridors. One learning manager explained how he would build a relationship with students through interest and praise and that any behaviour issues are de-personalised, for example by using phases like 'learning has been disrupted' rather than personally criticising pupils. There is an 'open door' policy in school where senior leaders and other staff can wander in and out of different classes and offer praise to students and teachers. Senior leaders are expected to get to know and interact with students throughout the school day rather than work in offices.

Benefits:

Developing a praise culture in educational settings can build and strengthen positive relationships between staff and students and help students to feel valued and motivated. Praise can also provide positive re-enforcement for behaviour that promotes learning.

School staff at Greenview Academy felt that students respond well to the praise culture and that whilst elements of it may have existed previously, it is the whole-school approach that ensures it is effective. One teacher commented:

'Having been here for a long time, previously I never felt it was cultural, it didn't really work. Now because it's all linked, shared all the time, everyone knows about it. It's key cultural change, before it didn't map together well, now it's all tried and tested.'

Tips for Success:

In order for praise to be effective, teachers should take time to get to know their pupils and notice their efforts as well as their achievements. They should be specific about what students are receiving praise for and be detailed about this. Praise should not be offered for the sake of it for weak efforts and should not concentrate on personal characteristics but on the work that students have done. Teachers can give non-verbal cues to re-enforce praise such as smiles. Try to ensure all students receive praise equally, not just those who may be excelling more often. Ensure every teacher is aware of the praise strategy, and how to praise effectively and is supported to carry this out.

Additional Resources:

https://strobeleducation.com/blog/the-power-of-effective-praise-a-guide-for-teachers/

Conclusion:

Praise can be an effective way of promoting student engagement and success when undertaken in the right ways. Meaningful relationships between staff and pupils should be at the core of everyday interactions and be supported by the praise culture.

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