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The Gift

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Praise as a Gift in the Relationship between Teachers and Their Students

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Abstract

The term "giving" refers to the altruistic act of offering something to another person for free without expecting anything in return. While prosocial behavior can also be found in very young children, altruistic behavior emerges later, with the moral and cognitive development, also supported by adult praise, that children may receive within the educational relationship. Education, in fact, has the noble purpose of guiding people to a better condition than they are now, through relationships. The aim of this paper is to review the works that have analyzed the effects of praise in the relationship between teacher and student. Experimental studies over the last 50 years have shown that praise is a low-cost strategy that teachers can use to increase adaptive behavior in the classroom and decrease problem behavior. Furthermore, the use of praise improves the classroom climate, as it is a vehicle for positive emotions. Modern neuroscience has now shown how emotions play an important role in learning, including school learning. Therefore, we could consider praise as one of the greatest gifts a teacher can give to their students.

Keywords: educational relationship; gift; learning; positive emotions; praise.

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1. The gift

According to the vocabulary of the Italian language Treccani (2022), the term *donare* ("to give") indicates the action of giving to others freely and with disinterest.

The concept of gift is of great importance in social sciences, particularly in cultural anthropology. In *Essai sur le don* (1923-24), Marcel Mauss

observes that in many societies exchange may also take a very different form from the utilitarian logic of market exchange and economic trans-actions based on a logic of "give, receive, respond". Unlike this market logic, the gift can be seen as a form of exchange without pre-established equivalence: it is also a time-delayed exchange. In the societies studied by Mauss, exchange had not only an economic significance but also a social, political and religious one: it was a "total social fact". Developed in studies of societies of traditional ethnographic interest, the concept of gift has proved to be an important analytical tool for modern societies. The transactions that take place in families, in parent-child relationship, and in the world of volunteering are mostly based on the logic of giving (Mauss, 1950).

From a developmental perspective, the logic of giving might sprout in humans together with moral standards and prosocial behaviors. In line with Piaget's framework, some researchers argue that these developments are due to a cognitive shift away from an egocentric orientation and that this leads also to improved communication skills (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Prosocial behavior is behavior that is intended to benefit another people. It may be motivated by self-interest, practical, moral or other concerns and is grounded in moral emotions including guilt and empathy. Altruistic behavior is also behavior that is designed to help someone else, but altruism is generally considered not to be motivated by self-interest. In common use, what distinguishes altruistic behavior from prosocial behavior is the willingness to help another without any thought of compensation. Altruistic acts are therefore motivated by internalized values, goals and self-rewards rather than by the expectation of concrete or social rewards. Research has demonstrated that we see the beginnings of prosocial behavior in quite young children, whereas truly altruistic behavior occurs only later on (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2006). From an educational perspective, this means that, as young children, we need social reward, also in the form of praise and approval, as one of the way we have to develop the intrinsic motivation that may leads to altruistic behavior (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

2. The educational relationship as a gift

The educational purpose can be described as the noble goal of guiding a person towards a better condition than the one in which they find them-selves. It is important to clarify the human quality of the educational act. It is only by proceeding from such a clarification, in fact, that the criteria for

answering the question of the relationship between pedagogy and anthropology can be illustrated, and thus a rethinking of education as a gift and care of human beings.

Humans are intrinsically communicative and, therefore able to implement authentic educational communication that favors the growth of young people and the community in which they live. This human capacity could be a concrete response to the educational needs of the new generations. Educational relationships take place in a dialogical and intersubjective space, allowing interaction between two subjects, the educator and the student, developing the scope of interpersonal relationships. In this exchange, authentic dialogue involves the ethical desire to encourage sharing in the situation of the other without exploitation or instrumentalization. In authentic communication, the ego must put aside egocentric temptations to develop an attitude of understanding of the other, thus fully recognizing the other and their convictions. The aspect of reciprocity reveals that humans develop in the harmony of giving and receiving. Once there is an encounter, existence eventually becomes complete. Educators are called to help others and themselves to grow, to pursue the best of themselves, and to discover new possibilities of action and life. All this reinforces the idea that education is an activity of free donation to others so that we not only recognize them but also recognize ourselves (Indellicato, 2018).

3. Emotions and learning

The cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning are interconnected and influence each other. For instance, emotions (affective domain) play an important role in the quality of humans' executive functions (Geake, 2016). Executive function is an umbrella term that includes high-order cognitive abilities such as working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, planning, reasoning, and problem solving.

The neural networks responsible for learning can be classified into recognition, strategic, and affective. The recognition network receives, identifies, and categorizes sensory information perceived by students; the strategic network plans and regulates actions guided and oriented toward specific objectives; the affective network takes part in the emotional aspect of learning by regulating interest, motivation, and stress (Rose & Strangman, 2007).

According to the hypothesis of the somatic marker of Damasio (1995) the emotional component contributes to decision-making, selection, and orientation processes based on the information obtained from

the environment throughout life. The somatic marker, therefore, goes to mark a certain experience by creating an association between emotions and cognitive processes that become interconnected and regulate decision-making processes.

Hence, emotions influence and are influenced by cognitive processing. Each emotion has a different value and influence. Positive emotions (joy, happiness, etc.) have specific consequences on learning that differ from the effects of what is sometimes classified as negative emotions (sadness, anxiety, etc.). The deepest and oldest areas (for example the amygdala) of our brain are responsible for emotions. The hippocampus, responsible for long-term memories, is closely connected to the amygdala. These neural connections explain, at an anatomical level, the phenomenon for which the most remembered information is related to intense emotions. Negative emotions (fear, anxiety, frustration, boredom, etc.) negatively affect learning, while positive emotions (discovery, curiosity, surprise, satisfaction, etc.) positively influence learning by supporting it. Some negative emotions, however, if interpreted correctly, can also represent a positive stimulus for the development of cognitive skills (Meccariello & Mentasti, 2023).

Bower (1981) through the theory of affectivity network illustrated the process of emotional elaboration by stating that mood congruence facilitates the cognitive process. Mood congruence means that positive information is more easily associated with positive emotions, while negative information is more easily associated with negative emotions. Also in this case the brain architecture explains this congruence because it is organized by associations and semantic similarity. Two close pieces of information are more likely to be activated and this closeness is usually given by the similarity and association between the two (Sulla, 2022).

4. Emotional education

During their school life, it is likely that a student may associates information or an event originally of a neutral nature to an experience full of negative emotions. As a consequence, this association make the neutral information negative itself. Seeing the premised presented in the preceding paragraph, we now know that sometime, for some students, learning can become difficult, and school a place to escape from. A possible solution to this type of association is an approach based on emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence can be defined in different ways, but it was Salovey and Mayer (1990) that coined this term for the first time, defining

it as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p. 189). Emotional intelligence, therefore, allows one to optimally organize relationships with the surrounding environment and promote psychological well-being and consequent academic success (Lucangeli, Bonichini, & De Gennaro, 2019). Daniel Goleman (1996) suggests that with the development of emotional intelligence comes the balance necessary for the emotional dimension to appropriately influence all other dimensions of life.

Given that emotions play a primary role in the lives of all individuals, and students make no exception, an emotional education achievable through "emotional literacy" programs is essential. Desirable programs start from the first degrees of education with the aim of promoting self-awareness and the development of emotional and social skills. Students and teachers take part in the educational relationship not only on a cognitive level but also on a behavioral and emotional level.

The success of the learning process is therefore influenced by the emotional impressions and the consequent cognitive evaluations implemented by the learner. The emotional perception of the pupil in relation to the teacher's teaching proposal must be taken into account. The educational relationship, however, is characterized by the student, whose emotions are important for the success of his or her learning, but also by the teacher, who also has an emotional dimension relevant to the success of the learning process (Meccariello & Mentasti, 2023).

5. Praise as a vehicle of positive emotions

The literature shows that the teacher's behavior may have a strong influence on students' social and academic behaviors. This literature also shows that, behaviors such as praise may be seen as one of the most powerful tool in teachers' hands, as it was demonstrated in experimental studies that it may increase students' adaptive behavior and decrease the disruptive ones (Swinson & Harrop, 2005; Sulla, Perini, & Rollo, 2013; Apter, Sulla, & Swinson, 2020; Sulla & Rollo, 2023).

Although there is no universal definition for praise, despite some differences, common roots of praise found in seminal works (Brophy, 1981) have influenced many current definitions and appear to yield positive outcomes (e.g., Sulla & Rollo, 2023). In most recent studies (e.g., Caldarella *et al.*, 2020; 2023), praise is defined as a verbal indication of approval following student behavior more than acknowledging a correct response.

Praise can be divided into person-praise (the praise towards the person) and process-praise (the praise toward the person's performance). Kamins and Dweck (1999) hypothesized that person-praise, because it involves a global assessment based on a specific behavior or performance, would teach students to measure themselves by their performance and would thus foster more helpless reactions to setbacks. Such feedback includes praise (or criticism) that comments on students' abilities, goodness, or worthiness after their performance of a task or that expresses the adult's global evaluation of the student on the basis of their performance (e.g., disappointment or pride in the student as a whole). In contrast, they hypothesized that feedback that focused students on examining their strategies or effort (process-feedback) would foster more mastery-oriented responses to setbacks. Although the positive effects of praise in school is well-established in the literature, we know that most teachers struggle to use it as an educational instrument.

From a study on the natural rates of approval and disapproval in Italian classrooms by Sulla and colleagues (2019) it is clear that in the Italian context, students receive, at all school levels (from primary to secondary), a greater number of negative feedback and disapproval than positive feedback. In particular, the majority of teachers' feedback is of a negative nature and directed in response to students' social behavior. In Italian primary schools it was found a rate of 0.8 disapproval per minute (meaning, almost once a minute a child or class is told off by their teachers). Positive feedback was mainly directed toward students' academic behavior, while feedback directed towards their social behavior was very seldom observed. The cause was found assessing teachers' feedback behavior through functional analysis. Most of the time, praise do not have an immediate consequence (there is no contingent reinforce) for teachers: the students keep behaving in a good manner. On the other hand, teachers' reprimand has an immediate effect, in the sense that it makes disruptive behaviors to stop, in that precise moment, after teacher's reprimand. This contingent consequence effectively reinforces teachers' disapproving behavior. On a different level, the cause of such behaviors may also lie in cultural heritage, where the punitive mindset is widespread and accepted (Sulla, Armenia, & Rollo, 2019).

The problem is, that, while teachers think that continuing disapproval will stop misbehaving in class, this may actually lead to worst classroom climate. Indeed, especially pupils that are considered to be the most problematic, may find teacher disapproval reinforcing. Pupils that exhibit the greater number of problem behaviors, in fact, are usually "seen" by their teachers only when they misbehave. On the other hand, they are usually

ignored. This may make them starving for teachers' attention. This is the point when even negative attention, in the form of disapproval, become reinforcing: seeing that I receive attention only when I misbehave, I will keep misbehaving. This entangle teachers and pupils into a vicious circle characterized by negative emotions, that, as we previously said, may hinder pupils' learning.

Praise, on the other hand, as hard as it is to be used as an educational instrument, is the best gift we can give to our students. Indeed, praise, is a vehicle of positive emotions. As we have seen in preceding paragraphs, cognition is helped by positive emotions. Indeed, intelligence works best when the student is happy. A teacher does not necessary have to make their students laugh, but can be a mediator of well-being in learning complex things. When a student learns, in fact, alongside memorizing, for example, the procedure for calculating a multiplication, he or she experiences emotions: fear, anxiety, pleasure, interest, curiosity, boredom. What are the worst emotions for learning? On a cognitive level, boredom; on an emotional level, guilt and fear. I feel fear when my brain perceives a risk. I feel guilt when I perceive that I have made a mistake. The guilt mechanism arises because the one being judged attributes the sole responsibility for the error to themselves. Removing guilt from the mind is one of the most difficult processes from an educational point of view. Educating through the emotion of guilt is very risky, because it short-circuits our brain. The student who has learned by experiencing a negative emotion, in an attempt to retrieve from their memory, the information he/she has studied, will also reactivate the negative emotion connected to it. This is the short-circuit we are talking about: students' brain has to process two sharply contrasting pieces of information – I want to hold on to that information because I need it to succeed in math class, but, in the meantime, I feel like I need to run away, because it hurts (as a consequence of the fear and guilt they are experiencing while learning through disapproval)!

Fortunately, there are solutions. Malka Magalit (2003; 2012) from the Academy of Sciences has found antagonistic emotions: boredom can be contrasted through joy and happiness. Fear can be prevented by encouragement. That is, an attitude that recognizes the error, but proposes a way out and encourages students to come out of the error. The antagonistic emotion of guilt, on the other hand, is cognitive and emotional discernment. Hence, blame must be replaced by the principle of giving the due weight to what initiated the improper behavior.

This is why we should consider praise as a gift within the educational relationship. Praise can be the vehicle of encouragement, joy, and happiness: the emotions that foster pupils' learning.

6. Conclusions

Quintilian, in ancient Rome, had already emphasized how important is in the educational relationship the process of esteem and affection that is established between learner and teacher, to promote the understanding of the disciple and adapt the educational work to their personality and their particular psychological moment, all the more so in today's Society, which is characterized by uncertainty and fragility. This principle must be the basis of every educational process.

Every day our classrooms are dotted with faces, often fragile stories, lives that are like fragile vessels to be handled with care.

It is useless to take an authoritarian position that aims to transmit content in an intimidating form, prohibitions, and forms of obligation that lead to carrying out a task only out of fear are worthless. On the contrary, productive and motivating is to accompany the student along the learning process, encouraging them with praise and approval, which makes the individual feel part of the context and active protagonist of their education.

Such an attitude, made up of gestures and words that translate into gifts for those who receive them, improves mood, empathy, and human relationships, and gives concrete form to the often cited meaningful learning: learning capable of resisting time and developing those life skills and soft skills important in every context of life. Such an attitude will have repercussions on Society as a whole, elevating it and raising a generation ready to make a difference now and in the future, as it will circulate gratitude, that ability to look at life with greater confidence and in a positive way, without being able to specify whether the serenity felt was the consequence of this new state of mind or the latter the cause of serenity (Sulla *et al.*, 2020; Fantinelli *et al.*, 2023).

This confirms that the deepest and most lasting happiness is to be sought outside the material and can be more easily achieved on an immaterial basis because our thoughts stripped of material evidence leave the spiritual factors of being free. Attributing infinite intelligence to limited matter is a mistake that does not advance mankind, which, on the contrary, could develop greater intellect, a more balanced mind, and a healthier constitution by relying on spirituality.

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Riassunto

Con il termine "donare" si fa riferimento all'atto altruistico di offrire qualcosa a un'altra persona gratuitamente senza aspettarsi nulla in cambio. Mentre comportamenti pro-sociali si possono trovare anche in bambini e bambine molto piccoli, i comportamenti altruistici emergono più tardi, con lo sviluppo morale e cognitivo, anche supportato dalla lode degli adulti, che i bambini possono ricevere entro la relazione educativa. L'educazione, infatti, ha il nobile scopo di guidare le persone verso una condizione migliore rispetto a quella attuale, attraverso l'incontro. Il presente lavoro ha lo scopo di passare in rassegna i lavori che abbiano analizzato gli effetti della lode nella relazione tra insegnante e allievo. Studi sperimentali negli ultimi 50 anni hanno dimostrato come la lode sia una strategia a basso costo che gli insegnanti possono utilizzare per incrementare i comportamenti adattivi in classe e diminuire i comportamenti problema. Inoltre, l'uso della lode migliora il clima di classe, in quanto è veicolo di emozioni positive. Le moderne neuroscienze hanno ormai dimostrato come le emozioni rivestano un importante ruolo nell'apprendimento, anche quello scolastico. Pertanto, potremmo ritenere la lode come uno dei doni più grandi che l'insegnante possa fare ai propri studenti e alle proprie studentesse.