A Study of Praise, Motivation, and Self-esteem of Low-achieving Students in Mentoring Groups

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Abstract

The study attempts to examine the effects of evidence-based praise strategies on the learning motivation and self-esteem in low-achieving students in mentoring groups and study the processes that influence the corresponding changes. Participants in the study were students from two secondary schools in Hong Kong. Thirty-two students participated in one of the four weekly mentoring groups, each of which was facilitated by a school-based mentor. Data triangulation and methodological triangulation were employed in the study; data were collected from student questionnaires, observational field notes, and interviews with mentees and mentors before and after the intervention program. Two major findings arise from the investigation: first, the implementation of praise strategies, which promoted adaptive attribution patterns, was effective in the enhancement of students' learning motivation and academic aspect of self-esteem while no significant change was noticeable on their global self-esteem. Second, it was found that the corresponding change processes should be understood from the interacting forces of the environment, student personal factors, and student behavior. In particular, mentor-mentee relationships and social climate in learning environments emerged as key contextual factors which mediated the outcomes of praise administration. In conclusion, when bestowed strategically, praise can be conducive to learning motivation and self-esteem of low-achieving students. More research is needed to cover more diversified populations and understand the long-term consequences of research-informed praise strategies.

Keywords: mentoring, learning motivation, self-esteem, low-achieving students

1. Introduction

In an attempt to enhance the motivation and self-esteem of low-achieving students, a wide range of instructional strategies have been suggested by educational psychologists, with praise being singled out as a particularly valuable and desirable form of reinforcement of good conduct and successful performance in the classroom setting (Brophy, 1981). As a mentor teaching English language at a secondary school with most of its students performing below average academically, I observed that most students did not devote time and effort to learning. It was speculated that the reason for this behavior was that they had experienced much more failure than success in their academic pursuits; strongly influenced by the examination-oriented and competitive school culture, students subconsciously equated their self-worth with the scores they obtained from academic assessments such as tests and examinations. However, when students were praised for positive learning behavior other than academic results alone on a consistent basis, their level of classroom engagement and self-confidence in learning appeared to be higher. In line with my teaching experience, a number of research have shown that praise, if effectively administered, can offer an array of benefits on learning motivation and self-esteem, such as boosting self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997), enhancing feelings of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and encouraging adaptive effort attributions (Henderlong, 2000; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Having said that, the vast majority of previous research is primarily based on experimental procedures that necessarily remove the actual context in which praise is bestowed without taking the change processes of students into consideration; little is known about the changes of beliefs, intentions, cognitions, and even behavior of students in the natural learning environment, which is useful information for teachers in managing student learning. Furthermore, the measures of motivation and self-esteem in previous findings were mostly self-reported by research participants in surveys; the adaptation processes were often not examined and explored in detail. Therefore, this study attempts to use mixed methods, including surveys, interviews, document analysis, and observations, to study the changes of motivation and self-esteem in low-achieving students under the local secondary education after the intervention of praise strategies in a naturalistic setting. It then offers justified explanations for the changes observed. It is worth noting that the research intends to provide insights into the dynamic relationships between the instructional strategy of praise, learning motivation, and self-esteem of lower-achieving students such that instructional delivery and appropriate interventions can be more effectively designed by teachers in the promotion of student learning in future.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Overview of Praise, Motivation, and Self-Esteem

Praise refers to positive evaluations made by the teachers of a student's products, performances, or attributes, where the teacher as an evaluator presumes the validity of the standards on which the evaluation is based (Kanouse, Gumpert, & Canavan-Gumpert, 1981). It should be noted that praise connotes a more intense and detailed teacher response to student behavior than such terms as feedback and acknowledgment (for example, "That's correct"; "You scored 80 marks."), which are classified as neutral forms of recognition (Brophy, 1981). Moreover, the characteristics of praise statements may also affect children's responsiveness to praise; characteristics of effective praise include its being contingent on desirable behavior

(Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Willingham, 2005), behavior specific (Chalk & Bizo, 2004; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000), and focused on effort and process (Dweck, 2000; Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). Henderlong and Lepper (2002) state that praise is not simply a one-way transmission from the teacher to the student praised but rather a complex social communication in which both have equally important roles to play; the effects of praise differ depending not only on the content of praise but also the context involved, the intended meanings of praise conveyed, and also the interpretations of praise by students.

Motivation is one of the most important concerns that educators and teachers deal with in order to improve student learning (Williams & Williams, 2011). It has been found to be essential in facilitating a desire to engage in learning and pursue educational goals (Elliott, Hufton, Willis, & Illushin 2005; Reeve, 2006). According to Maehr and Meyer (1997), motivation is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior. In the classroom setting, the concept of learning motivation is used to explain the degree to which students invest attention and effort in different pursuits, which may or may not be those desired by school teachers. Learning motivation is rooted in students' subjective experiences and their reasons for doing so and can be understood as a complex construct that is contextual, domain-specific, and inherently changeable (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Self-esteem is defined as the evaluation of our own self-concept and value that each of us places on our own abilities and behavior (Woolfolk, 1995). It can be categorized as either global or specific; the former refers to an all-round feeling of self-worth and confidence while the latter refers to a feeling of self-worth and confidence with respect to a specific activity or behavior in such domains as academic, emotional, physical, and social (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Self-esteem influences the psychological well-being, motivation, and achievement of individuals, as suggested by Franken (1994):

> "People who have good self-esteem have a clearly self-differentiated self-concept… When people know themselves they can maximize outcomes because they know what they can and cannot do" (p.439).

Adolescents with high self-esteem are likely to be successful in accomplishing their life tasks and tackling learning challenges, whereas those without healthy self-esteem may fail to meet these challenges, withdraw socially, and even experience depression (Duys & Hobson, 2004; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; UsznyskaJaromoc, 2007; Wick, Wick, & Peterson, 1997). A positive self-concept is therefore important because it drives a person to achieve, develop positive social relationships, and enjoy satisfaction in life. However, according to some researchers, self-esteem may be vulnerable during the secondary school life (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling, 2004). This seems to be particularly true because adolescents experience several transitions during this period of changes of school and changes in family and peer relations (Akos, 2002; Chen, French, & Schneider, 2006).

2.2 Relationship of Praise, Motivation, and Self-Esteem
The potential power of praise is evident in the research literature, in which programs are developed that involve a systematic and contingent use of praise over time for the

purpose of reducing classroom behavior problems and encouraging students to learn. It has been demonstrated that effectively administered praise can be a successful technique for influencing students' learning motivation and performance, including increase of intrinsic motivation (Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Harackiewicz, 1979), academic performance (Elawar & Corno, 1985; Hancock, 2002; Schunk, 1983), self-efficacy (Schunk, 1983), and decrease in classroom behavioral problems (Harris, Wolf, & Baer, 1967; Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; O'Leary & O'Leary, 1977). Early research has also revealed that at any grade level, students with low socio-economic status backgrounds or from minority groups tend to be especially responsive to praise and encouragement from teachers (Kennedy & Willcutt, 1964; Leith & Davis, 1969). However, a growing body of research has challenged the purely beneficial effects of praise and suggested that praise may have no observable influence dependent on the context in which it is distributed and the message communicated (Brophy, 1981; Deci et al., 1999; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

The discrepancies of research findings mentioned above can be resolved by the expectancy-value model (Feather, 1982; Pekrun, 1993; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The model holds that the effort people are willing to invest in an activity is the product of (a) the degree to which they expect to be able to perform the activity successfully, and (b) the degree to which they value the rewards and the opportunity to engage in the process involved in carrying out the activity itself (See Table 1). In order to enhance the expectations for success, both theory and research have illustrated that attributional focus of praise statements may hold significant value in the determination of students' motivation (Stipek, 2002; Toland & Boyle, 2008). A number of research studies have investigated the effects of praise on motivation when the attributional message is directed at the person and the process (Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Person praise aims at evaluating a person's traits or the person as a whole; in person praise, the good performance is attributed to something that the student cannot control. Process praise focuses on recipients' efforts or strategies; in process praise, the good performance is attributed to something that the student can control.

Table 1. Students' Strategies in Response to Classroom Activities as Related to Expectancy and Value Perceptions (Hansen, 1989)

	Has low success expectations	Has high success expectations
Does not value the task/activity	*Rejection:* Refuses to participate	*Evading:* Does the minimum
Values the task/activity	*Dissembling:* Protects image of competence	*Engagement:* Seeks to learn

Experimental evidence shows that praising a child for ability or intelligence may lead the child to attribute the success to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes. Whereas individuals who attribute their success to internal abilities and traits have been found to maintain their self-efficacy (Schunk, 1996) and motivation (Weiner, 1985), individuals who attribute their failures to abilities will develop helpless coping strategies and a sense of self-worth contingent on external measures of success (Haimovitz & Corpus, 2011). Furthermore, it can also be seen that person praise contributes to a self-perpetuating downward spiral of self-derogation among low-

esteem children (Brummelman et al., 2014). However, when an individual is praised for hard work, he or she will be more inclined to interpret success as a result of controllable effort and will continue to try hard when challenges and setbacks arise (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Hence, effectively presented praise is an important component for any intervention designed to promote learning motivation and self-esteem.

2.3 Theoretical Framework of Current Research
From a social cognitive perspective, learning is described as the process of converting information from the environment into mental representations that guide behavior (Bandura, 1986, 1999). Ormond (2008) argues that its success as a model of learning is attributed to its basis in behaviorism and its potential for incorporating new developments in cognitive modelling. Focusing on important theoretical issues such as the role of reward in learning and stability of behavior, the theory offers a reasonable view of human behavior and social implications. The basic assumptions of the theory are listed as follows:

1. Students can learn by observing the behavior of others, for instance, their teachers and classmates.
2. Learning is defined as a cognitive process and may or may not involve changes in observable behavior. Whether a certain behavior can be observed depends largely on the presence of an appropriate environment. This underscores the importance of creating a desirable learning environment.
3. All student behavior is directed towards a goal, which is not necessarily the same for every student and depends on both the demands of the environment and individual needs.
4. Students' behavior eventually becomes self-regulated because of the consequences of the behavior.
5. Reinforcement and punishment play an indirect role in influencing student behavior, but they are important in helping to shape student expectations of the consequences of their behavior based on what they see happening to students, the environment and personal preferences.

Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism describes the social cognitive perspective by explaining the relationship between student personal factors, social environment, and student behavior. The student personal factors include such concepts as motivation and self-esteem; the student environment includes positive and negative reinforcements; and student behavior refers to time and effort spent on tasks, attention in learning processes, and performance on achievement tests. With reference to the framework, praise is considered as an intervention in the classroom environment, which results in a chain of changes in students, their behavior, and the environment itself (See Figure 1).
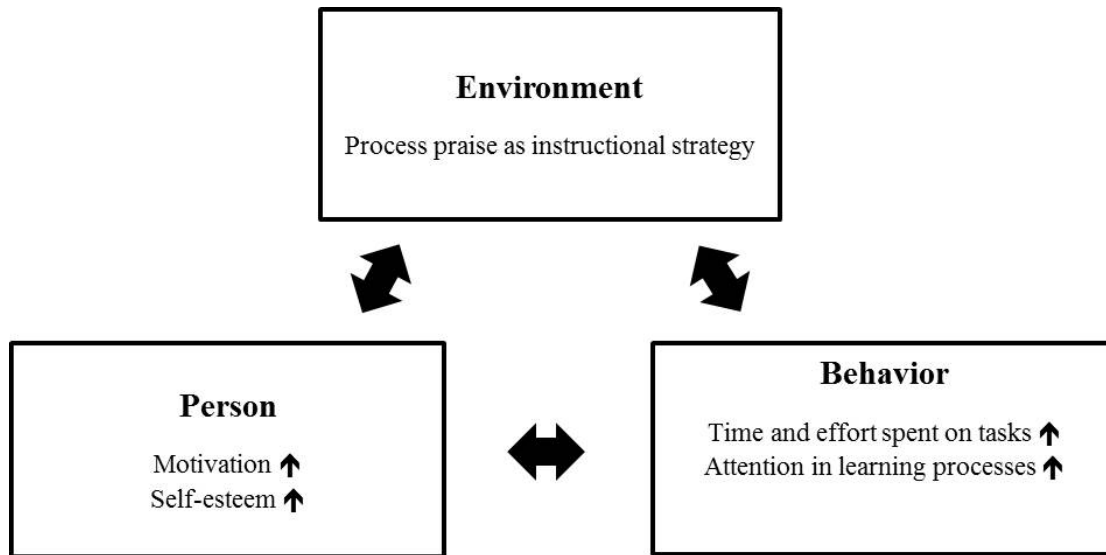
Figure 1.   Theoretical Framework

Given the small number of studies, however, it remains unclear how praise in actual classrooms lead to changes cognitive processes in the person praised, and in their corresponding behavior, suggesting the need for more research. In an effort to shed light on the interdependence of these three components, a program which incorporates the intervention of praise statements in the classroom setting is studied in the current research. The key characteristics of praise include being contingent on desirable behavior, behavior specific, and focused on effort and process. The dynamics among student personal factors, behavior, and environment are then thoroughly investigated. The two research questions of the present study are as follows:

1.   Were there any changes of learning motivation and self-esteem in students after implementation of praise strategies? If yes, what were the changes?
2.   How did the implementation of praise strategies bring about the changes of learning motivation and self-esteem in students?

3. Research Methodology

The research study was undertaken at two government aided co-educational secondary schools in Sha Tin district. The majority of the in-take students were in the lowest third upon admission to school in terms of their academic achievements Moreover, more than 30% of the students in each school came from low socio-economic family backgrounds and sought financial subsidies from the government. Both schools have participated in an English mentoring program provided by a local non-governmental organization since the school year of 2014/15. The program focuses on the enhancement of learning motivation and self-esteem of low-achieving students, using mentoring in English as the point of intervention. A total of four recent university graduates have been appointed as school-based mentors to conduct English mentoring in small group context during the regular English speaking lesson on a weekly basis. The class size ranged from seven to twelve students and each weekly lesson lasted between 35 to 45 minutes.

The study was conducted from September to December 2015. It included the participants of all four mentors and a sample of 32 mentees (21 males and 11 females)

from both junior and senior secondary in the aforementioned two schools. All of these 32 students in the four mentoring groups took part in the survey study. Using the typical case sampling method, one student in each group, who had an average motivation and performance in learning, was selected by the mentor and invited to be interviewed. All four mentors were also separately interviewed in the focus group study for cross-referencing with the results from students. Finally, class observations were arranged with each group to study the intervention impact. Permission to conduct this study was received from the two school principals and four mentors; the students and parents were informed with information sheets and asked to give permission with consent forms.

Interventions
Prior to the commencement of English mentoring sessions, mentors were offered a training session on the administration of effective praise strategies which could potentially enhance students' learning motivation and self-esteem. Mentors were also instructed to complete journal entries immediately after each mentoring session to reflect upon the administration of praise in an attempt to assist in their continuous self-improvement (See Appendix A). Reflection items included the praise statements administered, characteristics of the praise statements, and behavioral changes of target students.

Instruments
Two sets of questionnaires on learning motivation and self-esteem, namely Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (adapted) (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965), were administered before and after the program intervention. The former survey takes into account the value and expectancy components of motivation in classroom learning while the latter measures the global self-esteem.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were also conducted to gauge the views of mentees and mentors respectively. The duration of the former ranged from 15 to 25 minutes and the latter from 25 to 35 minutes. To enhance the representation of all the small groups, a mentee of each mentoring group was invited to be interviewed on the experience of the mentoring class (See Table 4). Both interviews began with questions on demographics and proceeded with questions and responses regarding experience on receiving and administering praise; prompts were used to probe for further information whenever appropriate.

Furthermore, two class observations were conducted with each of the four mentors to obtain first-hand information on the administration of praise statements in classroom environments and examine the corresponding responses from students. In addition to the field notes taken during each of the 45-minute sessions observed, the video-taped lessons were reviewed subsequently to take note of student behavior indicative of learning motivation and self-esteem in the hope of producing a comprehensive evaluation of mentees' learning performances.

Table 4. Profile of Student Interviewees

Students Selected for Interview	Mentee A	Mentee B	Mentee C	Mentee D*
Gender	F	M	M	F
School	School 1	School 1	School 2	School 2
Form	S.2	S.5	S.2	S.5
Mentor Comments	Passive learner with low confidence in English learning, especially public speaking.	Active in extra-curricular activities, but not interested in learning English and other academic pursuits.	Poor relationship with peers and teachers maintained, destructive learning behavior demonstrated to draw attention.	Socially withdrawn and disengaged from classroom learning.

*The student was withdrawn from the mentoring class in the midst of school term. No interview was conducted by the end of school term consequently.

4. Research Analysis and Findings

Part A – Were there any changes of learning motivation and self-esteem in students after implementation of praise strategies? If yes, what were the changes?
The questionnaire data collected during the pre- and post-tests were then inputted into and analyzed by the software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Below are the descriptive and inferential statistics.

Student Questionnaire – Descriptive Statistics
In the pre-test, 32 students completed the questionnaires of MSLQ (M = 42.59, SD = 14.45) and RSES (M = 29.24, SD = 5.07) respectively. In the post-test, 29 students returned the questionnaires of MSLQ (M = 47.80, SD = 13.81) and RSES (M = 28.62, SD = 5.56) respectively.

Student Questionnaire – Inferential Statistics
Cronbach's alphas were computed for each questionnaire set prior to conducting t-test to ensure reliability. The values were greater than 0.9 for measurement of learning motivation and greater than 0.8 for measurement of global self-esteem, both of which indicated a good internal consistency estimate of reliability of test scores.
The results of paired t-test revealed that the mean score of learning motivation in the post-test (M = 47.80, SD = 13.81) tends to differ statistically significantly (t = 1.518, df = 28, two-tailed p = 0.140) from that of pre-test (M = 42.59, SD = 14.45). However, the mean score of global self-esteem in the post-test (M = 28.62, SD = 5.56) did not differ statistically significantly (t = -0.533, df = 28, two-tailed p = 0.599) from that of pre-test (M = 29.24, SD = 5.07).

Student Interview, Mentor Focus Group Interview, Mentor Reflection Log, and Class Observation
Consistent with the quantitative findings, the analysis of student interviews revealed that the magnitude of changes in learning motivation had been more significant than in self-esteem (See Table 6). The results indicated that Mentee B, who had a medium level of learning motivation and academic self-esteem at the beginning of the school term tended to show improvements in both aspects after the program intervention. According to the student, he usually performed poorly in English learning because he had a lack of initiative to study for the subject. He would expend some effort in task

completion only when his teacher offered direct and clear instructions. Although Mentee B was a sports team member and performed quite well in the team, he attempted to compare his strength in sports to high academic achievers and downplayed the importance of his potential. However, in the second interview, he appeared to be more confident and motivated to learn English. He became more aware of the appreciation of his mentor when he engaged in positive learning behavior. He could also articulate what he did well in class with a high level of confidence, for instance, asking questions when in doubt and helping peers with task. All these indicated that he had been a committed and confident learner in the mentoring group.

Mentee A displayed a high level of motivation to learn and high academic self-esteem in the pre- and post-interviews. She was very comfortable in sharing examples of her successful learning experience and seemed to be interested and engaged in learning. Having a high self-regard, she was able to participate in class activities actively, display initiative in learning, and accept praise from the mentor without any embarrassment. It could be concluded that Mentee A had maintained her motivation to learn and positive self-concept after her participation in the program.

Among all the interviewees, Mentee C appeared to be the one who lacked confidence and motivation to learn the most. He encountered a number of social problems at school, such as poor teacher-student and peer relationships, which posed a threat to his motivational and socio-emotional developments. In the second interview following the intervention by his mentor, he was able to recall a few rare experiences of being praised and recognized for his positive learning behavior, such as being attentive and helping peers to answer questions. Nonetheless, his self-esteem maintained relatively low because he often disregarded the compliments even though he was aware of his improvements.

Table 6. Case Studies of Individual Mentees

	Baseline Assessment	Year-end Assessment
Mentee A Self-esteem	*High – Pride in academic accomplishment* "I got a high score on a worksheet… Most students could not do it but I completed it very fast."	*High - A sense of competence* "I feel happy about the mentoring session… I have learnt a lot about English, such as drawing mind-maps and usage of vocabulary…"
Mentee A Learning motivation	*High - Enjoyment in class activities* "Our lessons are not boring and we are very happy. Sometimes we go like crazy in class and cannot stop laughing… The same happens to teachers."	*High - Initiative to learn and engagement in class activities* "When I asked her (the mentor) how to use some vocabulary words, she also complimented my effort. I was then busy correcting my (writing) work…"
Mentee B Self-esteem	*Medium - Negative self-image and peer comparison* "Maybe I am good at sports… Strength is all about comparison; your (my) strength is nothing to the student who ranks first in academic studies."	*High - A sense of belonging and contribution in class* "Once I voluntarily helped my peers to answer questions when they fell asleep, he (the mentor) also showed his appreciation of my behavior."
Mentee B Learning motivation	*Medium - Lack of initiative and effort in learning* "I have studied in this school for five years and I think the students are relatively lazy, including me… We are very naughty in English lessons and we do nothing in class…but we follow the teacher's instructions in doing projects."	*High – Initiative to learn both in and out of class* "He (the mentor) often appreciated us for asking questions… Last time, he praised me for asking additional questions after class because it was about learning... We were also rewarded for making attempts to read and explain words."
Mentee C Self-esteem	*Low - Lack of self-regard* "Wisdom is always with me… But just forget it. People usually think I am stupid."	*Low - Reluctance to accept sincere praise* "A few weeks ago, I was praised for being attentive in lesson… It was true but I didn't have much response and I quickly returned to the classroom."
Mentee C Learning motivation	*Low - Disengagement in learning due to poor teacher-student relationship* "Teachers are quite mean sometimes and I am often teased… That is, when I said something wrong (and stopped answering), they would say I used to be proactive in answering questions…"	*Low-Medium - Improvement in perception towards teachers* "All teachers want to teach students well… I would give myself 50 marks on the performance… I was attentive 50% of the time and wasn't at the remaining time."

Notes: Description of data elements. There are two outcomes of behavior: LM=learning motivation; SE=self-esteem (academic). Motivation is defined as the processes that include the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of goal-directed behavior, while self-esteem is defined as the evaluation of self-concept and value that students place on their own abilities and behavior. Each component has three levels, non-numerically represented as low (L), middle (M), and high (H), with reference to the case-ordered descriptive meta-matrix proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Part B – How did the implementation of praise strategies bring about the changes of learning motivation and self-esteem in students?

Prior to establishing the relationship between praise strategies, learning motivation, and self-esteem, it is essential to examine the intervention – the actual administration of praise strategies – in the classroom context. A review of the field notes taken during class observations and mentor reflection logs confirmed that the majority of praise statements could be classified as effective because they embodied the characteristics of being specific, effort-focused, without social comparison, contingent upon positive learning behavior, and mentor-initiated (Brophy, 1981). It was also observed that the praise statements administered were found to be primarily focused on the following aspects of positive behavior: perseverance (*"I notice you are on task and have the courage to try. Well-done!"*), improvement (*"Good try! You tried to speak up just now!"*), engagement (*"Good try! Thank you for your effort and contribution. I appreciate that you answered today!"*), and strategy *("Excellent! You have elaborated your ideas in English. You've done a great job!")*. All of these can be categorized into a larger theme of "process-oriented" as opposed to "person-oriented." Furthermore, no overuse of praise statements was noted; on average, mentors attempted to administer one to two praise statements to each of the participating students within a mentoring session.

To account for the changes of learning motivation and self-esteem, two important contextual variables, namely the perceived relationship between mentors and mentees and social climate in classroom, emerged from the qualitative data. Upon a detailed analysis of the student interviews, it was found that the mentorship was characterized by trust, care, and mutual respect. According to the mentee interviews, mentors were most often described as reliable people whom mentees could turn to when they had academic or even personal problems. For example, Mentee B mentioned,

> "He (the mentor) does not only teach but he also helps us solve real life problems… (I have also learnt from him that) the relationship between teachers and students can be very close, unlike the traditional Chinese culture that emphasizes the hierarchy of power and that students must admire and show utmost respect to teachers. It is clearly not the case in this (mentoring) class… I asked him a question irrelevant to English learning once (through social media). He was aware that it was very late in the night and cared about me…"

It was also discovered that mentors had spent a considerable amount of time to engage and build rapport with mentees outside of regular lessons in order to nurture a caring relationship. For instance, Mentee A recalled the experience when she and her mentor first encountered in the school canteen and had a delightful conversation, while Mentee C described the relationship with the mentor as excellent and cited a recent experience in which he taught the mentor how to play the piano out of class as supporting evidence. The findings from mentees also echoed with those from the mentors. When asked about their roles, mentors unanimously agreed that they are close friends and role models who facilitate the learning and development of students. In the hope of fostering the change processes, they employed a variety of strategies, which included taking an initiative in building and sustaining rapport and providing

customized learning support. It was evident that the solid relationships between mentors and mentees added credibility to the demonstration of sincerity implied in the praise statements, which was stated as the single most important factor in their acknowledgment by interviewed mentees.

In addition to the trustful relationship between mentors and mentees, mentees who sustained a medium to high level of motivation and self-esteem also commented that the learning atmosphere was in general supportive and interactive. Both Mentees A and B pointed out that the small-group learning environment had enabled mentors to understand and cater to individual learning and developmental needs. For example, their mentors were reported to have adapted the pace and content of teaching to ensure mentees learn most effectively. Mentees also agreed that they were provided with ample opportunities to converse and socialize with classmates in a more casual and relaxing manner when compared to the traditional English classroom with school teachers. The subjective learning experience of students was also in alignment with the empirical evidence collected during class observations in which such elements as guidance from mentors, peer support, and equal opportunities to participate were identified. On the other hand, although Mentee C articulated a nurturing relationship with the mentor, who spent out-of-the-class time to interact with him, he tended to hold a negative view of the classroom ambience. He described his peers as generally lazy and reluctant to learn even with the dynamic learning activities in class. Lacking a sense of belonging, he also considered it as natural for his classmates to be distracted from listening to teachers and to keep talking on less important personal things. There is a high likelihood that the dearth of a perceived supportive learning community had affected his motivation to stay engaged in the mentoring class and thus not much improvement in academic self-concept was manifested in the closing interview when compared to the preliminary one.

To further investigate into the change processes, it was found that under the supportive mentorship in a nurturing learning environment, the administration of process praise brought forth a pattern of similar changes in Mentees A and B and their behavior. Perceiving it as sincere and non-controlling, the mentees regarded praise from mentors as a recognition of their abilities to complete learning tasks. During the interviews, they described that the mentors had had clear expectations of the class, and whenever their peers had demonstrated the positive learning behavior, the mentors would make equal effort to recognize it through genuine praise. In addition, both mentees exhibited the openness to accept the praise and treat it as valuable feedback to strengthen learning performance. The enhancement in self-efficacy appeared to determine their choices of subsequent learning tasks and lead to an overall improvement of the demonstrated learning performance. For example, Mentee B had clearly demonstrated an adaptive motivational pattern in the post-interview; when asked about the most significant changes in the attitude towards learning after the first school term, he reflected on the value of exerting effort to improve learning outcomes in his response:

> "… When I practice after thoroughly understanding the topic, the result is usually not that bad. Therefore, I have learnt a great lesson that listening and understanding is very important to my motivation to learn because only then will I start doing."

Similar observations were noted by their mentors, who suggested that the learning behavior of mentees had shown marked improvements, including a higher frequency to ask and answer questions and an increase in effort in task completion. It was very likely that their successful experience to manage classroom tasks along with the attributional messages embedded in praise statements by the mentors had increased their perceived expectations for future performance. However, for Mentee C, who differed in the perception of social climate in the classroom when compared to Mentees A and B, the impact of praise on motivation and self-esteem seemed to be limited and the no change on subsequent behavior could be observed.

5. Discussion and Conclusio

General Discussion
The current study revealed two main findings with reference to the two research questions. First, the results derived from both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that in general, mentees who completed the mentoring program in the first school term experienced an increase in learning motivation. While there was no significant change in the global self-esteem as measured in the student survey, the academic aspect of self-esteem appeared to show improvements in accordance with the interviews with mentors and mentees. It was not a surprising finding because the implementation of praise strategies focused on student learning, which is only one of the many dimensions of self-esteem. Second, it was found that the causal relationship of adaptive motivational processes and attributional messages implied in the praise statements is not unidirectional but should be comprehended in a larger context, which involves the mentor-mentee relationship and learning ambience. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework on the application of social cognitive model to explain the effects of praise on motivation and self-esteem and the detailed change processes.

Environment
Process praise as instructional strategy under supportive mentorship in nurturing learning community

Praise with attributional messages enhances self-efficacy

Successful experience strengthens a positive learning community

Self-efficacy determines choices of learning tasks

Praise with attributional messages reinforces learning behavior

Motivation promotes improvement of learning behavior

Person
Motivation ↑
Self-esteem ↑

Behavior
Time and effort spent on tasks ↑
Attention in learning processes ↑

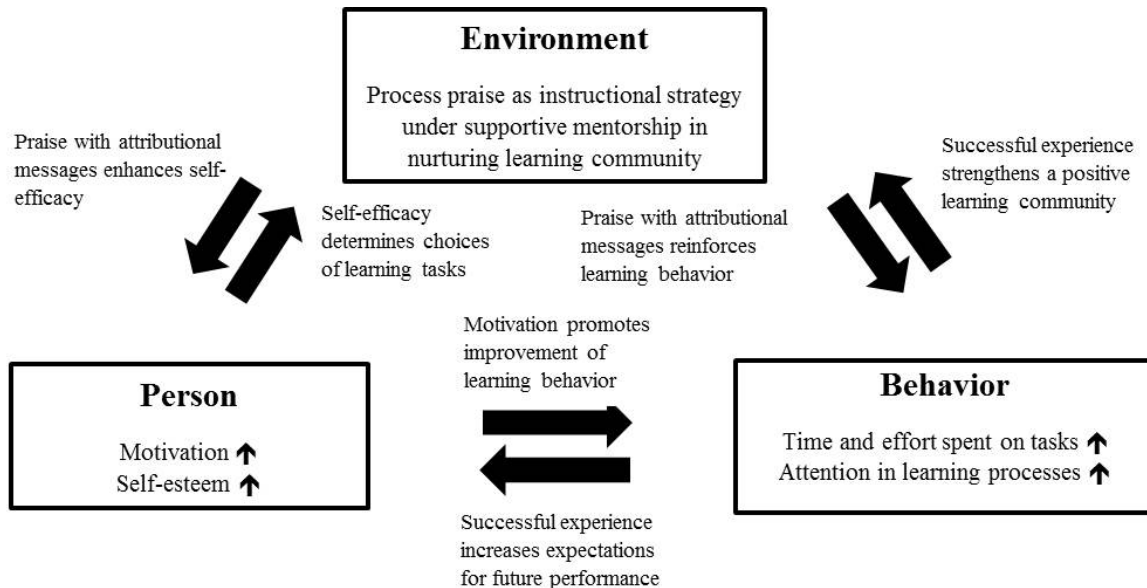Successful experience increases expectations for future performance

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: Relationship between Praise, Motivation, and Self Esteem

Research Implications

This study is an attempt to utilize a more sophisticated research methodology to gain insights into the impact of praise in the classroom environment by understanding the perspectives of mentors, mentees, and researcher. The findings that research-informed praise strategies have positive psychological effects on the learning attitudes and motivation of low-achieving students in a classroom setting have important theoretical and practical implications. The qualitative data collected in this research study has disentangled the underlying adaptive processes by providing insights into the perceptions of students towards themselves, their behavior, and the environment, which cannot be gauged from the majority of research literature on praise. Moreover, prevention and intervention programs and other educational programs have been commonly found to utilize praise as an instructional strategy to enhance motivation and self-esteem of different target participants (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006). In addition to the preference of process praise over person praise in initiating changes in learning behavior, the current study has preliminarily identified building of trustful teacher-student relationships and development of collaborative classroom environments as fundamentals for transforming low-achieving students into more motivated and confident learners through praise because these two contextual elements are found to be crucial to their psychological adjustment in learning (Rohner, 2004). The study also extends the practical implications that teachers and curriculum developers who have the intent to motivate students to learn should focus not only on content design but also on the delivery process and instructional strategy. In particular, recognition should be provided for all students who make noteworthy progress, not just to the highest achievers. Students should be praised for a broader range of achievements, such as demonstration of perseverance and engagement, and not just for high scores on standardized tests and examinations; recognition should be based on levels of progress made toward individually established goals as a result of effort. In response to the call for research to examine praise in teacher-student interactions (Brummelman et al., 2014), the present study has provided initial answers to the role of praise in motivation and self-esteem in naturalistic settings and enriched the understanding of their complex interdependent relationships.

Conclusion

The research results support the theoretical assumptions concerning praise, motivation, and self-esteem outlined in the introductory material (Ormond, 2008). The effects of praise on motivation and self-esteem and the underlying rationale have been found to be complex and should be examined without overlooking the importance of context. In spite of the aforementioned limitations, the present research indicates that praise is likely to have positive motivational consequences when attributional messages when perceived competence and self-efficacy are heightened without social comparison and when realistic standards and expectations are properly conveyed. It can provide encouragement and support when made contingent on effort and can be informative and reinforcing when it directs students' attention to genuine progress or accomplishment. However, it is worth noting that the perceived relationship with teachers and social climate in the classroom should be both positive such that the impact of praise on learning motivation and academic self-esteem of low-achieving students can be achieved.

Appendix A: Mentor Reflection Log (Template)

Research Project
Mentor Reflection Log
Program   Mentor: _____   School   Assignment:
_____

Topic: (Session #)			
Date:			
Praise Statement	Target Student	Target Behavior	Characteristics of Praise*
In the next session… Target Student(s), Replacement Behavior(s) & Praise Strategies:			
* S = specific, I = immediate/intermittent, T = teacher-initiated, E = focus on effort, A = sincere and appropriate voice, V = void of comparisons			

Appendix A: Mentor Reflection Log (Sample)

Research Project
Mentor Reflection Log
Program   Mentor: _____A_____   School   Assignment:
_____1_____

Topic:	My City – Hong Kong		(Session # 1)
Date:	12/10/2015		

Praise Statement	Target Student	Target Behavior	Characteristics of Praise*
I notice you are on task and have the courage to try.	Coco	Be attentive – on task	STEAV
I notice you have tried hard.	Timothy	Work hard	TEAV
Thank you for telling me you feeling.	Oscar	Participate in class	SITEAV
You gave a good suggestion.	Wincy	Offer ideas	ITEAV
Thank you for being the first one to offer useful ideas.	Yoyo	Offer ideas	SITEAV
Very good! You helped your classmates.	Amy	Be helpful	STEAV
I notice you have also tried hard. Keep it up!	Sam	Work hard	TEAV
You asked a right question for the class progress.	Oscar	Ask questions	SITEAV

In   the   next   session…
Target Student(s), Replacement Behavior(s) & Praise Strategies:
1. Coco: address on her perseverance in time; praise her for asking her neighbor's questions and for help
2. Timothy: praise his willingness to offer ideas despite upon request to motivate him to give more opinions
3. Sam: ditto

* S = specific, I = immediate/intermittent, T = teacher-initiated, E = focus on effort, A = sincere and appropriate voice, V = void of comparisons

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol – Student Interview (Baseline Assessment)

I.   General Background Information
1.   Research background
2.   Student background

II.   The Role of Praise in Learning Experiences
3.   Describe your school life.
4.   Do   you   have   strengths?
     a.   What   are   they?
     b. Describe a situation you exhibit the strengths.
     c.   How   have   your   strengths   been   formed?
     d. Are your strengths recognized by others, such as teachers and peers? How do you feel?
     e. Is there any other thing you think should be recognized?
5.   When   was   the   last   time   you   were   recognized   or   praised   by   teachers?
     a.   What   was   the   context?
     b.   What   did   you   do?
     c. How would you describe your performance?
     d.   How   did   the   teacher   respond?
     e.   What   did   you   feel   and   respond   in   turn?
     f.   How   much   do   you   like   or   dislike   being   recognized   or   praised?
     g. Do you think you deserved that praise?
6.   How   often   are   you   recognized   or   praised   by   teachers?
     a.   What   do   you   think   about   the   frequency?
     b. Is there any difference in frequency at various stages of schooling, e.g. kindergarten, primary   school   and   secondary   school?   Why?
     c. What kinds of behavior should be recognized and praised?

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol – Student Interview (Year-end Assessment)
**I.	General Background Information**
1.	Research background
2.	Student background

**II.	The Role of Praise in Learning Experiences**
3.	How do you feel about your school learning now?
4.	Describe your school life from the perspectives of (1) academics and (2) ECA.
5.	How would you describe your performance in the above activities?
6.	What do you usually do in the mentoring sessions?
7.	How do you usually interact with peers in the mentoring sessions?
8.	How do you usually interact with mentor in and out of the mentoring sessions?
9.	What are the similarities and differences between regular English teaching and mentoring sessions?
10.	When was the last time you were recognized or praised by mentor?
    a.	What was the context?
    b.	What did you do?
    c. How would you describe your performance?
    d.	How did the teacher respond?
    e.	What did you feel and respond in turn?
    f.	Do you like being recognized or praised?
    g. Do you think you deserved that praise? What do you learn from the mentoring sessions? What do you like most and least in the mentoring sessions? Why?
11.	On a scale of 0-100, how would you rate your performance in the mentoring sessions?
12.	How do you feel after participating for a school term?
13.	Would you recommend the program to your friends? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol – Mentor Focus Group (Baseline Assessment)

Interview Protocol
Before Recording
- Remind PMs to read aloud their names and schools assigned

Opening
- Mention date, time, venue and people of the interview to be conducted
- Discuss purpose of the interview, i.e. understand more about how program mentors conduct small group sessions

Interview Questions
1. What is your role as a mentor in small group sessions?
2. What is your approach to inspire and motivate students?
3. What kinds of strategies have you adopted?
4. Do you offer praise or recognition to students? Why?
5. Under what circumstances do you praise or recognize your students?
6. How often do you do so?
7. What do you usually focus on praise or recognition?
8. What do you intend to achieve?
9. Do you consider them as effective? How can you tell? (Give examples)
10. If you could do it again, how would you behave differently?

Ending
- Mention ending time and show appreciation to participants

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol – Mentor Focus Group (Year-end Assessment)

Interview Protocol
Before Recording
- Remind PMs to read aloud their names and schools assigned

Opening
- Mention date, time, venue and people of the interview to be conducted
- Discuss purpose of the interview, i.e. understand how program mentors incorporate verbal praise strategies into mentoring sessions to facilitate student learning and the impact of their use in the practical setting

Interview Questions
1. Describe the group dynamics and mentoring plan of targeted class.
2. What have you been doing to achieve the intended outcomes?
3. Describe the use of praise strategies. What are the actual outcomes?
4. Describe the use of mentor reflection log. What are the actual outcomes?
5. How effective or ineffective are they in initiating behavioral changes?
6. What are the success or failure factors of the system?
7. If you could do it again, how would you have done it?
8. How likely or unlikely would it continue to be implemented in targeted class and other classes? Why?
9. Other relevant issues.

Ending
- Mention ending time and show appreciation to participants

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