

The Impact of Praise in the Inclusion Preschool Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of praise in the inclusion preschool classroom as it pertains to students with and without identified disabilities. Praise and extrinsic/intrinsic incentives can have an immense effect on behavior management, and can create a positive learning environment for all in the classroom. The data in this study was comprised from observations in one rural Southwest Virginia inclusion preschool classroom. Daily behaviors, activities, and incentives were documented, as well as the amount of times students with and without disabilities were praised throughout the daily circle time instructional period. Results suggested that praise positively impacted the overall behavior of the classroom, and that students with disabilities were often praised more than those without, however this did not negatively impact students without disabilities. Students from both groups responded similarly to praise, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. Students are more likely to present with good behavior in the classroom when they are praised for things throughout lessons. When teachers are properly trained on how to use these techniques along with behavior management, the classroom environment will benefit.



Institutional Review Board Decision Tree

Based on your responses, you do not need approval from the IRB.

It looks like your research is exempt because it is educational research.



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Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

In recent years, inclusion classrooms have become a large part of the educational system. While they were created so that every child, no matter their disability, had the opportunity to be in their least restrictive environment, there are still many parents and even some teachers who are worry about how these types of classrooms may effect “typically” developing children. Throughout the years, there have been studies to show how inclusion classrooms are not only beneficial to students with disabilities, but can also be greatly beneficial to students without. This topic was chosen to examine the positive benefits through the use of praise that come from a non-disabled child being placed into an inclusion classroom.

A teacher’s self-efficacy can impact their feelings on their own classroom. Research has shown that teachers who feel ill prepared to teach in an inclusive setting feel more effective and more in control of their classroom ((Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, Karasu, Demir & Akalin 2013). While students in an inclusion preschool classroom are given the opportunity to learn empathy from a young age, as found through the research by Erwin, Alimaras, and Price, students with severe behavioral problems can have a great impact on the classroom environment as well. As previously mentioned, teachers that feel well prepared to handle specific needs of special needs students often operate a much smoother classroom, and the same thing has been found when teachers are dealing with children who exhibit challenging behavioral issues. When teachers are ready to handle these challenges, the negative impact on other students is greatly lessened and the teacher’s effectiveness is able to increase ((Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor, & Miels 2011). I will examine how the use of praise assists in the students’ confidence and behavior and how this may relate to the teacher’s self-efficacy.

Positive behavior management through the use of praise will be examined in this study in hopes of determining the differences, if any, among the use of praise in the inclusion preschool classroom. Praise is more likely to be present in this classroom because of the inclusion of children with special needs, and children without special needs are very likely to benefit from it.

Problem Statement

The impacts of the inclusion classroom have been debated for several years. While the world is becoming more and more accepting of people with special needs, some still do not believe in the positive implications of the inclusion classroom. There is a fear that students without special needs in the inclusion classroom will not get the focus that they might need, while others argue that the inclusion classroom has several positive effects on students with and without special needs. The problem of this study is to determine how praise, and the amount of praise given, effects children in the inclusion preschool classroom with and without special needs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine any effect, both positive and negative, of the impact of praise on typically and atypically developing students in the inclusion preschool classroom.

Significance

Inclusion classrooms are still a fairly new addition to the educational system, and there are many people that are still concerned about the effects that this kind of classroom may have on every kind of student. A study like this aims to research how something seemingly small (praise) impacts every child in the classroom. One of the main goals of the inclusion classroom is to create a positive learning environment for all students, where students can grow through their differences (Kennedy 2013). This research aims to show the any kind of effect, positive or negative, that would occur with the presence of praise in the inclusion classroom on all kinds of students.

Research Questions

This research will be evaluating four different things.

Research Question 1: How is praise used in an inclusion classroom towards students with and without identified disabilities?

Research Question 2: How is praise distributed among students with and without identified disabilities in the inclusion classroom?

Limitations

1. The research will be conducted within one inclusion classroom, and may not reflect every inclusion classroom setting.
2. The findings of this research will be based strictly on observation and the researcher's interpretation.

Definitions

1. **Inclusion Classroom-** A classroom that caters to the needs of students with and without special needs.
2. **Praise-** The act of creating a positive classroom environment through the use of the teacher's words.
3. **Least Restricted Environment-** The learning environment in which the child is least restricted

Overview of the Study

This study aims to show the noticeable effects of praise on children with and without special needs in the inclusion classroom. Chapter I includes the introduction to the study, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, limitations, definitions, and an overview of the study. Chapter II will include a critical review of literature related to the study. Chapter III will include the research methods used by the researcher. Chapter IV will include the findings of the study. Chapter V will contain a summary of the study as well as future implications.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Those who teach in an inclusive preschool classroom have many different beliefs and practices. The research that supports this claim shows some differences in opinion, as

well as some consistencies across the board. In a research project conducted by Akman and colleagues, special education and general preschool teachers were surveyed on the use of their classroom management strategies. Teachers in both of these classroom types used modeling behavior, rewards, verbal praise, and family consultation to help decrease negative student behavior. One way that special education teachers differed from preschool teacher was the use of physical contact to help contain a child presenting severe behavioral issues. This is not a method that is recommended for students outside of the special education *and* without another adult present (Akman, Aydos, Akar & Sansal 2014).

A research study conducted by Spear and colleagues examined the same kind of study, but was not exclusive to preschool. It is stated that in a general education classroom, students benefit from behavior management, and explicit instruction and modeling, as well as praise. The researchers determined that students at risk for disabilities benefit from the same classroom tactics, but they must be done in a modified way. The researchers stated that while they were able to discuss different beliefs and practices with educators, they were unable to determine if these differences effected progress scores (Spear, Piasta, Yeomans-Maldonado & Ottley 2018). These findings prove that more research should be done on this topic in the future so that the implications may be determined.

A teacher's attitude towards their class can certainly have an impact on behavior, however one research study looked at the feeling of teachers towards inclusive classroom settings. While one might think that there can be firm line between those who believe in them and those who do not, this study determined that there was neither a clear positive

or negative feeling towards inclusive classrooms from the teachers that were surveyed (Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, Karasu, Demir & Akalin 2013). It may seem disconcerting that there was not clear result, but the fact that there was no clear negative result helps in arguing the case that inclusive classrooms are not a bad thing. They can help children both with and without special needs. In classroom situations like this, empathy is certainly necessary. Peck and colleagues state that empathy is a natural human trait that is necessary in a preschool setting. They say that it needs to be especially prevalent in classroom now that they are becoming more diverse in student needs and that teachers should be trained in how to do this effectively. When students are treated with empathy, the opportunities for poor behavior diminish (Peck, Maude & Brotherson 2015).

Brock and Beaman-Diglia discuss just how teachers can be trained in specific classroom management techniques that will help in handling difficult children. They suggest using strategies such as visual representations and positive reinforcement to assist in helping children with severe behavioral problems, and in their research saw that these strategies were quite successful. However, it is noted that teachers feel more comfortable in handling challenging children when they feel that they have been properly trained in the correct techniques (Brock & Beaman-Diglia 2018). Another aspect of this is having great classroom management. This benefits children with and without behavioral issues. McCloskey provides several suggestions for creating a positive classroom environment. Children, especially children in preschool, need structure in their day in order to learn well. Additionally, McCloskey states that giving preschool children the option of making choices can positively enhance behavior in the classroom, i.e. “If you make a good choice and join your friends on the rug, you may get to be a helper during the lesson. If you

make a bad choice and stay here under the table, you may have to stay inside during recess.” (McCloskey 1996). Students must also be in an environment where they feel encouraged, and this can be done through the use of verbal praise. When students are praised for the positive things that they do, the climate of the classroom is sure to shift in a positive manner. All of the discussed items can contribute to a positive classroom experience for everyone involved in an inclusion classroom setting.

Students with disabilities and/or behavioral problems can impact students around them, as well as social interaction between students. The teacher’s management of behavioral issues is crucial, as it can positively or negatively impact every student in the class. Brown and Bergin studied how children with disabilities in the inclusion classroom were able to interact with their peers, and how teacher contributed to these interactions. They conducted this study at a time when children are traveling to different centers and freely interacting with each other. In their study, it was found that for 56.6% of the time they were playing in the centers, and of this time, they were interacting with typical developing peers 94% of the time (Brown & Bergin 2002). These numbers support the claim that inclusive classrooms increase the social interaction of children with disabilities, as well as create a positive environment for typically developing children can learn empathy.

Erwin, Alimaras, and Price conducted a study in a preschool classroom with a student that had severe visual impairments. The researchers observed this classroom and noted how the children interacted with Ryan, the visually impaired student. Though the interactions stated in the research, it can be concluded that Ryan’s peers have very positive interactions with him, however they can also tell that he is different from them in

some way. This is an example of how an inclusion classroom in an early childhood setting can teach typically developing children empathy for others, as well as becoming an environment where the child with the disability can thrive (Erwin, Alimaras, & Price 1999).

While the above examples show the positive factors of the inclusion classroom for children with disabilities that do not present behavioral problems, children that do have severe behavioral problems can impact the class in many different ways. A lot of how they impact the class is determined by how the teacher is able to effectively manage the behavior, and whether the management is positive or negative. However, several teachers have stated that they feel ill-equipped to work with children that have these needs. In one research study, three different preschool teachers were taught how to better handle children with behavioral issues. One of the teachers stated that while she felt she did a good job before the training, her management took a lot of time and energy away from other students. After all of these teachers went through this specific training, they began to feel more self-efficacy, and felt better equipped when disruptions arose in class (Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor, & Miels 2011).

Green, Mays, and Jolivette conducted research to prove that positive behavior based interventions can help children that present behavioral challenges in the classroom. Children with these traits may throw tantrums, have physical or verbal aggression, etc.. Usually such behavior is dealt with by punishing the child or calling the child's home. However, there have been several occasions where this has been ineffective. The researchers state that using problem based interventions (PBIs) as early as possible can help prevent the children from exhibiting "bad" behavior. The article also says that

children should be given the opportunity to make a choice to change their bad behavior into good behavior. The article ends by giving several steps to assist teachers in doing this, and by stating that when children are given choices, good behavior increases.

Because students with behavioral challenges can cause distractions for other students during instructional times, instructional aides are vital to the inclusion classroom in order to help it run smoothly and effectively. Teachers should work collaboratively with teaching assistants in the classroom, as they can provide the teacher with useful resources and information in regards to student needs (Da Fonte & Capizzi 2015). Brown and Stanton-Chapman state that teaching assistants play a major role in the social, emotional, and academic development of preschool students, especially those with special needs. However, paraprofessionals are often confused about their duties, and many have stated that they feel a lack of support in the classroom (Brown & Stanton-Chapman 2017). Troeva states that teaching assistants play a vital role in helping students with disabilities prosper in an inclusion classroom, however, once again this research concludes that while instructional aides are important, that are often frustrated at the clarity of their duties (Troeva 2015).

Despite the needs of children with disabilities and behavioral issues, inclusion classrooms can have significant positive effects on all children in the classroom. The use of praise and supporting positive peer relationships can have quite an impact on every child in the class, both socially and academically. There has been some research that explores the effects of praise on typically and atypically developing children in the inclusion classroom. Flores, Berlinghoff, Rader, and Reidesel state that with the right amount of praise, preschool students can become less disruptive. Their research

determined that that special education teachers use twice as much praise as general and at-risk teachers. Also, all teachers tend to use more general praise than behavior-specific praise, while behavior-specific praise can decrease behavioral problems among preschool students (Flores, Berlinghoff, Rader, & Reidesel 2017).

In an article from the Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences, it is indicated that teachers must establish a positive inclusive environment that is conducive to learning for all students. This is especially important when teachers are coming up against students with severe behavioral issues. It is crucial that teachers with students who may present behavioral issues create an environment that is conducive for the cognitive development of social skills and peer involvement (Forty years 2012). There is also much that can be done to create a positive social environment in the inclusion classroom. This research was done to provide a solution to increase the social capabilities of children with disabilities and behavioral problems in an inclusive classroom setting. Using methods such as this can decrease behavioral problems in the classroom. Students with behavioral problems may have less opportunities to interact in a positive manner with their classmates. The researchers used peer-mediated intervention to increase “quality and quantity” of peer interactions. It is important for children with disabilities to be in their least restrictive environment, and PMI’s can help children become more acquainted with positive interactions (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell, & Bedesem, 2012).

One of the main goals of inclusive preschool settings is to create positive relationships among the children. The relationships that the students build with each other promote cognitive development as well. Inclusive preschool teachers must stick with specific targeted activities to help all children flourish and continue to grow in

kindergarten (Kennedy 2013). There can be many benefits to the inclusion classroom for both typically and atypically developing children. While several people hold the opinion that inclusive preschool settings could potentially be detrimental to typically developing students, there is research to support the benefits of these programs.

Warren, Martinez, and Sortino conducted a study over the course of one year to attempt to pinpoint what a high quality inclusive classroom looks like. There is a growing need for these services, but a decreased amount of preschools that can properly serve students with disabilities. The team studied the progress of 46 preschool students, and used this to determine the quality of the inclusion program. Through monitoring, the researchers discovered that there were significant academic and social gains for both groups of students in the classroom (Warren, Martinez, & Sortino 2016). Zalaznick provides many different examples as to how inclusive preschool classrooms are beneficial to all students. He uses the example that children with disabilities- such as a child with a speech delay-can learn from his or her peers by learning how to communicate. The amount of funds for inclusive preschools is decreasing, but the need for programs like these is constantly on the rise. The research concludes by stating that in Colorado, preschoolers are significantly more prepared for kindergarten than those who did not enter programs such as these (Zalaznick 2017).

Progress monitoring can be used throughout the school year to assess student progress of both typical and atypical developing students. In one study, researchers used specific progress monitoring to track the effects of children in an inclusive preschool setting. The results were analyzed based on grouping levels of low, medium, and high levels needs, in academics and social interaction. The finding from the progress reports

showed that children made significant gains in academic and social setting (Palmer, Fleming, Horn, Butera, & Lieber 2018).

Inclusive preschool classrooms present a complex learning environment for everyone involved. It is increasingly important that teachers are properly trained so that they are better prepared to assist struggling students or manage behavioral issues when they arise. Instructional aides are an importance source that should be used in this kind of classroom setting to create a more positive environment. When all of these factors are working together, children with and without disabilities and/or behavioral problems greatly benefit academically, cognitively, socially, and behaviorally.

Chapter III

Methodology and Procedures

Design of the Study

This study is a qualitative study in which participants were observed in the classroom during circle time each day. The researcher will be observing how praise and its perceptions effect those with and without identified disabilities in an inclusion preschool classroom. Students' behaviors will be examined through observations and

keeping track of the amount of praise in the classroom, as well as if it is given to a student with or without an identifiable disability. The researcher will be the primary instrument of research data and analysis in this study, along with an inductive process to analyze and answer the presented research questions.

Sample Selection

Preschoolers in an inclusion classroom at a rural Southwestern Virginia elementary school were observed in this study in order to identify how praise is used in the inclusion classroom, and if it is used similarly between students with and without disabilities.

Approximately twenty-five students will be observed in this study, and permission was gained from a form that was sent home for parents to sign. In this letter, the study and the purpose of the study were stated. In the sample size, there will be six students with identified disabilities, and eighteen students without identified disabilities. There is one African-American student and the remainder of the students are white. The students without an identifiable disability were accepted into this program based on Title I factors. Many of the students are from low socio-economic families, single parent households, or need this year of preschool to prepare them for kindergarten. During the study, notes about the teachers and students will be recorded, but student names will not be recorded in order to protect student privacy.

Research Questions

R1: How is praise used in an inclusion classroom and is it used similarly toward students with and without identified disabilities?

R2: Does praise or lack of praise appear to be any more or less impactful between students with and without identified disabilities?

Data Collection

This inclusion preschool classroom will be observed daily for two weeks during circle time instruction for about an hour and a half. Notes will be taken freehandedly with pen and paper. The general mood of the class will be observed, as well as classroom management techniques that the teacher(s) uses to get the students to the rug each day. Because this could be a difficult transition time, behavioral disruptions will be noted as well as how the teacher handles these disruptions. Daily activities will be recorded along with how the children react to them, and the kind of praise that they are given. This may be how they were selected to be a helper, simple praise that they are given, and how the students react to this praise.

Academic and social responses will be observed and noted during this research. Student behaviors, level of classroom participation, amount of praise given to students with and without special needs, any obvious academic achievement goals that are reached, behavioral outbursts, and the classroom management strategies involving praise that are used throughout the daily lessons. Additionally, a daily count will be taken to see how many students with identified disabilities and how many students without are given praise throughout the lesson. Beyond instructional time, notes will be taken to identify several positive and praise-based behavioral management techniques that are used to assist the students. On the final day of observations, a list of these strategies will be created. Also, an overall reaction will be written to attempt to discern what was observed. Notes will be stored in a folder that is only accessible to the researcher.

Notes will be organized by date, beginning with the first day and moving towards the last. They will be simple observational notes with a count of students praised that day

at the end of every notes section. The compiled list of behavioral strategies will be separate, as well the researcher's overall reactions and discernments to what was observed through this research. An inductive process will be used to code these notes and group the observations into different themes. These themes will be used to answer the above research questions.

Limitations

There will be certain limitations and delimitations to this study. This study is searching to examine if students with identifiable disabilities receive more praise than those without in the inclusion classroom, and how this seemingly effects all students. Because of the nature of this study, findings will be based on observations of the students and the conclusion of this study may be delimited by the sample size that has been limited to one classroom.

Chapter IV

Findings of the Study

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the effects that praise and positive behavior incentives have on preschool aged children in the inclusion classroom. Through observations, the researcher was able to examine the students' reactions and responses to daily classroom activities as well as the teachers' reactions and use of praise

to correct or modify behavior. Observations happened mainly during circle time instruction. At this time, all children are in the classroom and many activities are used.

The sample consisted of 24 students in a rural Southwest Virginia inclusion classroom. Qualitative data was collected through observations, the amount of praise given was monitored, as well as if it was given to a student with special needs or a student without special needs. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were documented as well as how well they appeared to work in improving behavior and attention. Transitional activities were also documented; these included songs, exercises, and puppets as well as breathing techniques.

Data was also collected through tallying the amount of times a student was praised and how many times a student with special needs was praised as compared to a student without special needs. For one particular student that appears to have a difficult time almost each day, the times it takes the teachers and paraprofessionals to use typical positive behavior techniques before moving to more intensive techniques is noted. In this chapter, observations and conclusions, as well as specific praise to special education students compared to specific praise given to general education students is analyzed.

Demographic Data

The population of this classroom varied, but the majority of students came from low income households. Six of the students had IEPs and identified special needs, and eighteen of the students were typically developing. The youngest students with special needs, and they were three years old. The oldest student was also a student with special

needs, and he was six years old. Out of twenty-four students in the class, eight students were girls and the remaining students were boys. All of the students with identified special needs were boys. The age ranges vary because in this particular program, students with special needs may begin when they are three, and stay until they are five to six years old; as long as they do not turn six before October 1st of that school year, they may remain in the program if that is their least restrictive environment. Students without special needs may only stay in the program for one year and are not allowed to attend before or after the age of four. They may not be held back for any reason.

Qualitative Data Findings

Research Question 1 Findings: Research question one asked: How is praise used in an inclusion classroom towards students with and without identified disabilities?

The techniques implemented in the classroom to increase positive behavior were often praises of good behavior to encourage the continuation of positive behavior among children. Skittles and jellybeans were used as incentives and handed out to children sitting on the rug and doing what they were expected to do. Students were picked for jobs by paying attention and participating in the lesson, and special helpers (line leader, light helper, etc.) were picked based on behavior. Constant positive reinforcement was used throughout the lessons. Students were never told that they were explicitly wrong when answering a question, rather a teacher would assist them and then praise them for the trying their best and getting the answer correct. A new sticker chart hung in the hall each month, and when students had a great day, they received a sticker. Ten stickers on their chart meant that they could get a prize from the treasure box. When students were especially kind to their peers, they would receive a kindness note with extra recognition

at the end of the day and would pick a “cheer” that would be recited in front of the whole class.

All these incentives put a focus on praise and were used on both students with and without special needs in the classroom. Through observations, some specific examples were noted. During one observation, a student with special needs was being very disruptive. He runs around the classroom and tries to roll up in a rug, He is given the choice of choosing to behave and join the class on the rug or going to the “calm room.” The teachers pretend to ignore while he makes the decision. During this time, the students sitting quietly on the rug are praised and given a skittle. While this technique typically worked to get this student back on the rug with the rest of the class, it did not on this occasion. The student was removed from the classroom and the lesson continued as usual. When he reentered the classroom and made good choices for the remainder of the class, he was praised and given a skittle at the end of the lesson.

In another example, a student with special needs is randomly selected to be the weather helper for the day. Students are selected based on their attentiveness and participation. When students come back to the rug to report the weather, they are praised and then they sit down. This particular student has cognitive and language deficits and was praised more than usual for his use of a full sentence and speaking without being prompted. The goal was to further motivate this student to use his language skills.

Research Question 2 Findings: Research question two asked: How is praise distributed among students with and without identified disabilities in the inclusion classroom?

Each day, the number of students with special needs and the number of students

without special needs that were praised throughout the lesson were tallied. They were never less than five out of six students with special needs that were specifically praised during the lesson. More times than not, six out of six of these students were praised throughout the lesson. The least amount of general education students that were praised throughout the lesson were twelve out of eighteen students, and the average number appeared to be fifteen out of eighteen students. While all general education students were praised at some point, not every student was specifically praised every day. While this did not appear to make more or less of an impact in the students' participation and achievement, it can be concluded that more of a conscious effort should be made to praise each general education student at least once every lesson, every day in order to continue to increase positive behavior and production.

Chapter V

Summary of Findings

Discussion

Observations showed that all students responded in similar ways to praise. While it is obvious that students with special needs and students without special needs that may struggle a bit more are often given additional praise, there is nothing that was noted that showed students without special needs being negatively affected by the increase in praise

for students with special needs. Teachers worked hard to praise as many students as possible throughout the circle time lesson. In the very few times that there was less praise than normal, students with and without special needs became more unruly. It was in these instances that more behavioral outburst occurred and it often took more time and effort for the teacher(s) to refocus the class and that particular student. However, through the use of extrinsic and intrinsic incentives, both types of students appeared to greatly benefit from being in this classroom, and it appears that praise is greatly impactful between both demographics.

Summary of Findings

Praise is a very large part of this preschool program. It is constant throughout the day and students crave it and respond to it very well. The skittles and jellybeans are incentives that the students greatly respond to, and as soon as they see the container, they immediately behave in a way that they know is correct. There are a few select students, both special education and general education, that are occasionally disruptive, but not every day. These students were given additional praise to encourage them to exhibit good behavior. Students with special needs were often given more praise, but this could be because of the cognitive and language delays, as well as behavioral needs that can occur in some of these students. Praise not only encourages their participation but allows them the opportunity to correct their behavior.

Students in this classroom know that if they are doing what they are supposed to do, then they will be selected to be the weather helper, line leader, etc. It is obvious that they improve their behavior if they know that a teacher is getting ready to select a student for one of these activities. Also, if a student is having a particularly hard time, they are

told to stop doing whatever behavior they are doing, and after a few minutes have passed if they are not doing the behavior anymore, they are selected to do something during the lesson. This happened quite a few times during the classroom observations. Teachers would find a way to praise a student through giving them a small piece of candy or allowing them to have a job, and it would usually get the attention of the misbehaving student. This allows the student the opportunity to turn their behavior around, without immediately chastising them for what they are doing wrong. Chastisement sometimes caused an escalation of poor behavior. General education students benefit from a classroom where there is constant positive reinforcement and praise and attention for good behavior just as much as students with special needs. This classroom allowed the opportunity for both groups of students benefit.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how praise effects children with and without disabilities in the inclusion preschool classroom. It can be concluded that because of the incentives in place for these children, the positive approach to behavior management through praise helped both sets of children within the classroom. Research from this study shows that no child was treated differently in a negative way because they did or did not have special needs. Praise was used in a positive way among both sets of students and was mostly distributed evenly throughout circle time. The large amount of praise in this classroom allows all students the opportunity for success.

Implications

1. Students should be praised as often as possible in order to increase positive behavior.
2. Positive praise is beneficial to students with and without disabilities.
3. All students can benefit from attending a special education preschool program.

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