



GENERAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By Wilson McCaskill

General Acknowledgements of virtuous behaviour are the verbal, descriptive and detailed feedback that sufficiently inform and enable a student/s to repeat that behaviour.

General Acknowledgements (when warranted) can be given to an individual, group or the whole class and as often as the teacher decides. They can also be given student to student and it can be rightfully anticipated that as students directly and indirectly experience general acknowledgements they will start to use them themselves.

General Acknowledgements should be viewed as, *do good **not** feel good* feedback. They are the central mechanism by which virtuous behaviour is assessed, reinforced and maintained.

Teachers coming to UCRM after using the PLAY IS THE WAY® Methodology and Self-reflective Language will find *general acknowledgements* a simple extension of their current practice.

This part of the process slips easily into the general everyday interactions between teachers and students. It only requires teachers to verbally acknowledge students whose behaviour illustrates the key virtues and/or concepts. Teachers should be aware and engaged when making general acknowledgements and keep a mental note of whom they acknowledge.

In giving acknowledgements, teachers should try to encourage children to self-evaluate their behaviour. By describing and detailing their own actions a student defines the virtue and see it as something done, not merely understood. The same can be achieved by asking students to describe and detail the behaviour of others.

Guidance may be required to help some children realise that more often than not, they do actually feel good when they have done good. This connection helps children to see that doing good is the way to feeling good.

It's important that students are pursuing virtuous behaviour not solely as a means to be rewarded or to please their teacher, but because they see personal and community benefits in doing so. To this end, teachers should be frugal in their use of superlatives and nurture the belief that the right thing should be done simply because it's the best thing to do. (Yellow poster).

(See "Informative Praise" in the Play Is The Way Complete Program Volume 1 and the following articles on our website, "Duty Of Disclosure" & "Gotcha.")



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – A different mindset

Acknowledgements are a means by which the damaging affect of reflexive, hollow, superlative laden praise is removed for the benefits of feedback that is specific, focused, informative and strengthens the relationship between educator and student.

For some, using acknowledgements can be difficult as it first calls for stopping the well-entrenched habit of reflexive praise. It calls for the ability to identify process and to not merely respond to outcome.

If John gives Mary a piece of paper to draw on, it takes little for the teacher to say, “Well done, good boy John.” However, to have identified the sequence of John noticing Mary getting upset because her first picture wasn’t turning out the way she wanted and then seeing her look for another sheet of yellow paper (important to the overall design of what she was doing) and getting more agitated because she couldn’t find one, followed by John’s decision to give her his piece of yellow paper, to ease her anxiety, and find another colour for himself – takes observational skill beyond simply noticing that John helped Mary by giving her a sheet of paper.

Like most things, this observational skill takes practise and there can be no doubt that some teachers are inherently more skilled at it than others – just as some are naturally more comfortable with the relationship building conversation that accompanies an acknowledgement.

A good way to train yourself out of the habit of reflexive praise and into the skill of acknowledgements is to use the word “because.”

Anytime you use reflexive praise immediately follow with the word “because” and then proceed to validate, to the child, why you decided they needed praise.

Especially, use “because” whenever you use your most reflexive, favourite praise word or phrase. So many teachers have these. Words like fantastic, awesome, amazing, sensational, great work, that’s great, just brilliant, etc. that slip out of their mouths before they can be thought about or stopped.

Reining in this habit is best achieved by following through with “because.” Seeing John give Mary the piece of paper his teacher proclaims, “Fantastic, John.” Noticing what she just said his teacher follows through with, “because – you had the last piece of yellow paper and you kindly gave it to Mary whom you could see was getting upset. Do you think you did a good thing?”

John : Yes.

Teacher: And I’m sure Mary is finding the right words to use to show you she thinks so too.

“Because” forces you to be accountable for the praise you use. It is fair to say that when teachers start using this technique most discover, more often than not, they are



unable to follow through with any reasons of substance and find themselves floundering for words to validate their praise, thereby making it unwarranted.

Often, reflexive praise is simply the background sound of students' lives – a noise they hear but have little genuine response to, or worse still, a noise they learn to depend on and need before they can function.

If we accept that reflexive praise is, in large part, unwarranted and frequently no more than a vocal mannerism of the teacher, we can assume that its removal will mean that there will be many moments when nothing is said, no comment is passed and children just get on with the daily business of school. The mistake now is to fill this productive silence with the sound of constant acknowledgements.

Acknowledgements must be saved from this fate if they are to maintain their value. The value of acknowledgements is diminished by over supply.

This does not mean that teachers can't use the numerous non-verbal messages that constitute the complexity of a teacher's language with his or her students. A smile, a raised eyebrow, a hand gesture, a pat on the shoulder, etc. can all be used to convey informative messages. Once empty praise has been removed from the classroom, such gestures will themselves be endowed with more meaning and impact.

Acknowledgements are not to be seen as a substitute for reflexive praise and do not have to be delivered at the same rate and volume. They occur because they are warranted. They are in response to a situation that, when highlighted by an acknowledgement, will help to entrench the behaviour in one, some or all who either received the acknowledgement or were witness to it.

Their benefit lies not in frequency and volume but in the moment, manner and content of their delivery.

Educators who find the acknowledgements process difficult, need to first change the way in which they think about them and then give themselves time to adjust to the process.

For some educators this can be a problem. In removing unlimited supplies of praise they feel a tremendous pressure to fill the space with acknowledgements.

Frequently they complain about not having the time to do enough acknowledgements in a day or they were so busy they simply forgot to acknowledge the behaviour of students.

Those who do complain in this manner are usually those who think that if they are not saying something positive to students all of the time, then something negative is inadvertently being conveyed.

For the best of intentions these teachers believe that if you're not constantly saying, "Well done" the students won't know they're doing well. Provided students have been encouraged to self-evaluate, there will be little evidence to support this belief.



A Foundation/Year 1 General Acknowledgement Scenario

Several children are playing in the sandpit. Shari and Pedro are near each other.

Teacher: Pedro, can you please tell me what you just did with the little shovel?

Pedro: I gave it to Shari.

Teacher: Why did you do that?

Pedro: Because she wanted it.

Teacher: How did you know that? Shari didn't say anything.

Pedro: (Shrugs his shoulders)

Teacher: She did need it, that's for sure and when you gave it to her it certainly helped, but what I want to know is how you knew she needed it?

Pedro: (Shrugs his shoulders)

Teacher: Did you see her trying to shovel the sand in the bucket with her hands?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: And did you think she was finding it difficult?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: And you thought having a shovel would make it easier?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: So, you gave her yours?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: But didn't you want to keep using it?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: But you gave it to Shari anyway?

Pedro: Yes.

Teacher: Shari, don't you think that was friendly and helpful of Pedro?



- Shari: Yes.
- Teacher: Well I do too. Pedro, when you gave the shovel to Shari did she say anything?
- Pedro: She said. "Thank you."
- Teacher: Yes she did. What was she using Pedro?
- Pedro: Her manners.
- Teacher: That makes Shari a well-mannered person and you a friendly and helpful one Pedro. Is that right Shari?
- Shari: Yes.
- Teacher: Pedro?
- Pedro: Yes.
- Teacher: I would like to thank you both for behaving in a way that keeps our play area safe and friendly. Seeing how to help someone before they even ask is a very important skill, Pedro. You keep working on it, all right?
- Pedro: Yes.
- Teacher: And Shari, what are you going to do with the shovel now?
- Shari: Give it back.
- Teacher: Is that the right thing or wrong thing to do?
- Shari: Right thing.
- Teacher: Yes it is, which makes it the best thing to do.

It goes without saying that such conversations take far more time than simply bathing Pedro and Shari in a wash of superlatives. The time spent on this informative feedback not only educates Pedro and Shari (and any other children who may be directly or indirectly listening), it also strengthens the relationship between the children and their teacher.



An Upper Primary General Acknowledgement Scenario

- Teacher: Are you happy with your test score?
- Student: Yes.
- Teacher: It's certainly better than the one last week. What changed?
- Student: I just put my head down and gave all my homework a go.
- Teacher: You mean you persisted?
- Student: Yeah, I guess.
- Teacher: I must say it was encouraging not to hear you making excuses for not handing in assignments.
- Student: I was just running away from the problem.
- Teacher: Which means you found something very important inside yourself. Tell me what?
- Student: Courage.
- Teacher: It's a virtue that is often hard to find.
- Student: Yeah, I know.
- Teacher: Well congratulations on your test score, but more importantly, congratulations on practising the virtue that helped to get more out of your ability.
- Student: Thank you.