

MIKROS
DOUNIAS

PRAISE vs. RECOGNITION



The intentional choice of recognition over praise in the pedagogical community of Mikros Dounias in Lesvos

We are skeptical towards praise & reward...

An issue that occupies our community is the comments of praise and reward that parents and educators often bestow upon children. Usually, the aim of these comments is to support children in building their self-esteem. Yet, is this the most effective way to reach this goal? Do they effectively support the construction of an autonomous personality?

Our journey through practice and theory has allowed us to identify the following **dangers in the mechanism of praise**:

- **Imposition of our own values and opinions upon children.** Praise often derives from adults' certainty of what is "good" and "bad" for children. Through praise, adults can guide children towards certain behaviors, knowledge, skills or morals. Sometimes, this attempt can lead to the abuse of adult power upon children and to restriction of children's self-expression and self-regulation. For more, see Mikros Dounias' text on Adulthood.

- **A mechanism that motivates can easily be transformed into a mechanism that manipulates.** Praise is an unmistakable mechanism of motivating individuals or groups. When is it legitimate for adults to motivate children? Where, in each case, is the fine line between "motivating" and "manipulating"?

- **Praise is a form of evaluation.** Whoever is legitimized to evaluate positively, can also criticize or make negative comments on a child's effort or behavior.

- **Praise deprives children of agency of their own learning,** as it orients their motivations from intrinsic satisfaction towards extrinsic rewards. Children become increasingly dependent rather than independent as learners. According to Brooker, if our goal is to allow children have control over their own behavior and learning, we need to reconsider our evaluation strategy.

- **Children get the message that there is no need to develop self-evaluation skills,** as this role is already taken by someone else. For us, the tool of self-evaluation is extremely important: we want to foster self-awareness and self-esteem that does not depend on external evaluations.

- **Public reward** (i.e. an enthusiastic comment on a child's behavior in front of a group of children) fosters social comparison and competition. Brooker (2016: 203) refers to a study demonstrating that some children are already "addicted" to praise by the time they start formal education: they make comparisons and compete on an individual basis, constantly trying to prove themselves to classmates and teachers.

...yet our goal is that children's need for recognition is met.

Recognition is a fundamental human need¹. We detect this need in the children in our program and choose to act in the ways described below, always remaining open to new strategies and ideas.

· Description of what I see

It is not easy to unlearn the ingrained habit of seemingly benign enthusiastic praise. A tool that we can use, whenever we are tempted to praise, is description. For example, when we see a child that has climbed high, we can convert the enthusiastic, "Wow! Well done Maria!" to the objective, "Maria, I see that you have climbed to the top of the climbing net!".

Describing behavior can be particularly useful when a child requests praise, something that often elicits non-spontaneous, insincere reactions from adults. Some children tend to ask for adult confirmation or enthusiasm more than others. This is an indication of "addiction", and we take care to attend to this behavior.

Description both models vocabulary and helps children identify behavior that they can evaluate for themselves.

¹ This is supported by many theories, for example the ones of Todorov (in Lobrot 2015: 56, 2018: 90); Lobrot (2018: 91) and Taylor (Govaris 2011: 147). According to Govaris, in order for the subject to perceive his/her identity as a positive construction, this identity needs to be acknowledged in both interpersonal and collective level.

· **Systematic encouragement of self-evaluation**

Let's use the example of a painting. An adult who praises a painting transmits the message that there is no need for the child to evaluate it herself. The adult unintentionally restricts the child's freedom of expression, who might alter their natural creative intuition in order to elicit more compliments. In our daily practice, we try to abstain from judgements: we are convinced that it is the process, not the product that counts. If a child asks us whether we like her painting, we might reveal that we liked the way she created it: she was focused, happy, full of passion etc. Another strategy is to "return" the question and ask the child what she likes or dislikes about her painting. We listen carefully and give plenty of time to the reply. If necessary, we support the child in finding the words that she needs. Fellow children are welcome to join the conversation.

Brooker describes her experience teaching a first-grade class, where she encouraged self-evaluation. Very soon, the children realized that, when they showed her something, they had the agency to evaluate their own work. At the end of the school year, the children could evaluate their and their peers' attempts both accurately and confidently. She mentions that they were more motivated, independent and supportive to each other than any other class she had taught.

Read more on this topic on our booklet-calendar "[Art & Pedagogical Input from Mikros Dounias' Intuitive Painting Workshop](#)".

- **Focus on actions**

Lobrot clarifies that the only recognition that contributes to a person's well-being and development is the recognition referring to his/her actions (2018: 91). We perceive this as pedagogically crucial.

We allow ourselves to positively comment on a child's specific action, as long as our expression is original and sincere. We make sure that our comment is specific to the situation, explicitly expressing our personal view rather than an abstract adult ethic (i.e. "Ali, I liked the way you handled your disagreement with Maria" instead of "Well done Ali, we do not hit each other!")

Focusing on specific actions is important to us in broader sense. We avoid characterizing children with labels (e.g., aggressive, sweet or smart), so as to not assign them with roles that they feel urged to serve.

- **Love & presence, here & now**

The desire for praise is linked to the desire for communication. Instead of rewarding an action, we can acknowledge it through our supportive presence. We can open our ears, eyes and heart to help cultivate self-confidence. We feel that the continuous expression of our love towards each child and the unconditional recognition of his/her inherent value fully replaces praise of individual actions.

· **And what about spontaneity?**

It is not our goal to become “correct” adults, who have lost their individuality and innate spontaneity; after all, we are hoping to cultivate a unique sense of identity in children. Rationalized strategies, such as abstaining from praise, can be acquired gradually, through continuous practice. The fact that we are practicing collectively helps us a lot. Yet, when we happen to give praise, we make sure that we do not become discouraged or guilty. We choose to remain open, so as to remain authentic.

Literature (read & cited in Greek):

Brooker, Liz (2008). Supporting transitions in the early years.
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Govaris, Christos (2011). Introduction to intercultural education.
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Rosenberg, Marshall (2018). Nonviolent Communication:
A language of life. Volos: Kondyli Publications.

[The little tree that will become a forest:](#)
Pedagogical frame of a different school. Thessaloniki.

About us

[Mikros Dounias](#) is a pedagogical project on the Greek island of Lesbos. Every day, local and refugee children of early childhood age play and learn together in nature.

We, the children and adults of Mikros Dounias, organize our learning processes collectively, combining elements of intercultural education, free experiential learning and outdoor playing & learning.



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