THE PRAISE Model

Six Principles for an Effective Learning Environment

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Acknowledging the use of AI

I used AI to generate the cover and to proofread for any grammatical errors.

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A Note on Metaphors and Models

Some of the educational ideas in this booklet draw on simplified models of brain function, such as the Triune Brain and left/right hemisphere theory. While these models have been critiqued or revised by modern neuroscience, they are used here as accessible metaphors — not scientific claims — to support teacher reflection and classroom practice.

The PRAISE Model Six Principles for an Effective Learning Environment

A framework for building learner-centered, emotionally safe, and academically focused classrooms

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INTRODUCTION

PRAISE is an acronym for a set of behaviours, strategies and structures which enable teachers to create learning environments that promote good practice and foster high achievement among students. I have used these ideas myself in the 30-plus years I have spent as a primary and secondary classroom teacher, so they are not merely theoretical notions but tried-and-tested approaches grounded in common sense and reflective practice.

At its simplest level, PRAISE stands for:

- **P – promoting the positive**
- **R – reducing negative stress**
- **A – acknowledging the person**
- **I – illuminating the way forward**
- **S – structuring social interaction**
- **E – encouraging continuous improvement**

Notice that the use of the present continuous isn't just grammatical — it's intentional. These are not closed behaviours. They're in motion, always forming. PRAISE is not a fixed technique, but a mindset — a way of returning, again and again, to the things that matter.

Over the course of this booklet, I will focus on each of these elements to provide easy-to-implement ideas that teachers can consider to enhance classroom practice.

PART ONE

PROMOTING THE POSITIVE

We live in a society that is, by and large, unashamedly negative. News reports tend to deal with bad news, for that is what sells. The "fascination with the abomination" is something well documented by sociologists and even our weather reports embed the trend for negativity with comments like: "There will be a 70% chance of rain tomorrow," – as opposed to a "30% chance of sunshine".

Computer games which glorify violence are bestsellers and most things on television revolve around the need for "drama" – something bad has to happen in order to keep our interest.
So how can we reverse this trend in our classrooms?

Here are a few simple techniques which you might find useful:

a) Smiley Meet 'n Greet

Acting as a gatekeeper, smile at students with calm energy. It sets the tone. Keep the tone light — not artificial, but sincere. Guide them through a calm start. These moments at the threshold aren't trivial — they're powerful, even if fleeting.

b) Positive phone calls home

Parents expect bad news when you call – buck the trend by phoning home regularly, just to praise the little things the student is doing right.

If you are a parent, you will know this scenario only too well: you're at home and the phone rings. It's your child's teacher. Are your first thoughts, *Great! I am going to hear good news!* or are they *Oh no – what has my child done again? What's it this time?*

For most parents, receiving a call from their child's teacher—or head of year—means only one thing: bad news. So try reversing this trend. I found that by calling four parents each day (not the same four, obviously) just to tell them about something positive their child had done, I helped build constructive relationships with both parents and students.

Students would say to me the next morning, "You called my mum last night," to which I would usually reply, with a smile, "Yes, I know. I was there when it happened!" and add, "Well, she deserved to hear about the good things you did."

This was an effective way of praising boys who found it uncomfortable to receive praise in front of their peers.

I also found that if I did nothing else for the first term—just called home to praise even the smallest things—then when I called in the second term to ask for help with behaviour, parents were far more supportive. Many teachers only call home to complain about behaviour and then wonder why some parents are unhelpful or unresponsive.

Regular positive calls home also meant that students would often seek me out the next morning, and they would be the ones saying something positive as they entered the classroom!

c) Use positive peripherals

When students face the board, what do they see? Is there a list of sanctions and names for detention? How many positive, affirming things can be seen when the student faces the front? Although this is an extreme example, consider the following scenario: imagine your classroom walls were covered in graphic pictures from horror movies—full of gore, violence, blood and disturbing images. Would this be an environment you would like to teach in? Do you think you could happily teach with an optimistic spirit with those images staring back at you? How long would it be before they seriously disturbed you?

Yes, this is extreme, but I have visited classrooms where lists of the "named and shamed" are displayed for all to see—yet no positive lists or indicators of visible praise can be found to counterbalance the negativity. In other rooms, the field of vision is filled with classroom rules and administrative procedures which, important as these may be, do not create an atmosphere that uplifts the spirit.

So think of ways to enliven students' peripheral field of vision. Perhaps you could have all the classroom rules displayed at the back of the room so that they are immediately visible when students enter. When students are seated and facing the board, maybe you could place positive items on the walls to their left and right: exemplary work neatly displayed, with positive phrases between them. I have seen rooms where teachers photocopy cartoons and humorous pictures onto A3 and change them regularly so they don't become stale.

Then, directly around the whiteboard, why not create a "celebration space" filled with posters that "sing the praises" of the students you teach? These can be photos celebrating extracurricular achievements in drama, sport or cultural affairs, or uplifting posters with words of wisdom and eye-catching visuals.

I have met teachers who, in schools that still use detention, get students to create fun and bright posters supporting the learning objectives of the next day's lessons. Essentially, the students'

"punishment" is making colourful displays that are used the next day to complement the learning content of the class. It's an idea I have seen work in a school in Newcastle, though I haven't tried it myself.

d) Use positive feedback models

When you mark students' work, what are you looking for—things they have done right, or things they have done wrong?

One turning point in my career happened when a Year 10 student stormed into my classroom at the end of the day and literally threw her coursework at me. "What is this?" she demanded, with a fury that unnerved me. "It's your essay," I replied somewhat defensively, "the one that took me over an hour to mark last night." I had a system of numbering each mistake and writing lengthy explanations at the end of the essay next to the relevant numbers. I thought I was being thorough. "That may be so," she retorted, "but you haven't indicated a single thing I did right."

She was absolutely correct. There was nothing in my marking to celebrate or note the commendable aspects of her work. This changed things for me. I realised that whenever I marked, my pen was poised to underline mistakes. My mindset was to show students where they were going wrong.

It took me a while to break out of this mindset, and I did it by deliberately changing the way I thought. After that, whenever I marked an essay (this was before formative assessment became common), I first looked for what was good. A colleague then introduced me to a feedback model the students and I found very beneficial: the **PIPS** model.

i) Praise something specific – look for something worthy of praise and mention it.
ii) Indicate ways to improve – suggest how the work can be made better.
iii) Praise the overall effort – a comment that commends the piece in its entirety.
iv) Supply an uplifting comment – include the student's name and say something encouraging.

Teachers often rely on the old standby of "Well done," which, though encouraging, can become meaningless if overused. For instance, simply writing "Well done" next to a grade gives the student no advice on how to achieve the same again.

Another handy tip: when saying something positive about a student's work, mention the student's name. "Well done, Mary!" is better than a generic "Well done." Repeatedly doing this helps the student associate their name with positivity. Conversely, if you must note something negative, avoid using the student's name.

This is what/why you have done well, and this is what you can do to make it even better.

PART TWO

REDUCING NEGATIVE STRESS

I first heard about negative stress in Alastair Smith's book on *Accelerated Learning* some years ago, in which he draws attention to the role of the Reptilian Brain in learning. It was the first time I had heard about the concept of a Triune Brain—the theory that we have three areas of the brain corresponding to the evolution of our species. *(Neuroscience now treats this model as an oversimplification, but it still serves as a helpful metaphor for teachers.)*

Very simply put, the most primitive part of our brain (the part that evolved first) is called the Reptilian Brain and is responsible for our most basic "fight-or-flight" subconscious responses. The second area to have evolved is the Mammalian Brain, which is responsible for emotional bonding and emotional meaning, and the third, the Neo-Cortex, is responsible for our conscious decision-making processes. It is the Reptilian Brain that is the source of negative stress and which can be called into play in the classroom.

At the risk of extreme oversimplification, the Reptilian Brain is responsible for, amongst others, the following:

a) **Survival** – our fight-or-flight responses, which are subconscious reactions to our environment. An example is screaming when given a fright.
b) **Defence** – our response to having our space invaded or our possessions threatened. An example is feeling instantly uncomfortable when a stranger stands too close.
c) **Mating rituals** – responses to people we are attracted to, such as showing off or ensuring they notice our presence; for instance, feeling jealous when someone flirts with the person we desire.
d) **Hierarchies** – responses to people in authority or in power. An example is the subconscious need to be accepted by a gang leader or someone whose approval we seek.
e) **Rote behaviour** – conditioned, repetitive and predictable responses, such as berating ourselves with phrases like "You fool!" or "You always do this!" when we make mistakes.

The Reptilian Brain has other responsibilities too, but this article will not address those. Instead, we shall examine how situations in the classroom can call into play the notion of negative stress.

Negative stress—again, simplifying here—is a subconscious reaction to our environment whenever we feel our survival is threatened. If we are confronted by a mugger, for example, our conscious mind almost shuts down to allow the Reptilian Brain to take over, flooding our bodies with adrenaline so that we may escape.

In the classroom, situations that create negative stress in students cause them to react subconsciously to their reality; their reactions are not conscious decisions but protective reflexes. These situations are often driven by subconscious fear and may include:

- fear of losing face
- fear of being punished
- fear of being bullied
- fear of having shortcomings exposed
- fear of being called names, branded, or ignored
- fear of being bumped into or competing for personal space

The following situations may also result in negative stress:

- lack of clear routines and boundaries set by the teacher
- incomplete work or homework
- misunderstood instructions, tasks, or explanations
- feeling unheard
- a poor relationship with the teacher

The problem with negative stress is that it diverts the student's attention away from learning; their subconscious reactions cause their conscious mind to focus on their emotional state rather than on the lesson content.

Here are some tips to alleviate negative stress in the classroom. This list is by no means exhaustive.

1) Teach students relaxation techniques

Many students simply do not know **how** to relax or prepare themselves for learning. If a teacher acts as a gatekeeper and barks at students to remove jackets as they enter, the tone is set for what follows. Some teachers play relaxing music as students enter to embed a calm atmosphere before they sit down. Other useful techniques include:

- Have students sit up straight at the start of the lesson, hands in laps, spines straight, eyes on a fixed point in front of them, taking slow, deep breaths.
- Teach diaphragmatic breathing: when they inhale, their bellies rise; when they exhale, their bellies drop.
- Display a focus activity on the board—optical-illusion images, "how-many-faces" pictures, or *Where's Waldo*-type puzzles— something to focus attention.

2) Develop rituals and routines

Be consistent about what is expected before the lesson begins. At some schools, students stand beside their desks and wait to be seated; others require jackets off, books out, and a "ready" posture. Whatever routine you choose, ensure you consistently expect and reinforce it. As mentioned earlier, greeting students with a positive comment as they enter is one example of a consistent routine. Some teachers raise a hand to signal that students have five seconds to settle and face the front, then count down on their fingers before greeting the class.

3) Be consistent in your expectations and rules

Consistency is probably one of the most important features of teacher behaviour, because inconsistency often leads to classroom stress and resentment among students. Punishing one student for an action yet ignoring another who does the same quickly creates negative stress. Students feel safer and more secure if they have some input into the classroom behaviour policy, and their ownership of that policy goes a long way toward a positive atmosphere. A negotiated and agreed-upon policy, applied with utter consistency, helps students feel acknowledged and allows those who step over the mark to take responsibility. Avoid artificial deadlines and empty threats.

4) Build and maintain self-esteem

Consider how you are treated by senior staff: are you made to feel valued and supported? Do they make you pleased to be part of the team? Now think about your students. How often do you thank, praise, or say something positive to them? Are there students you seldom address directly? When you do speak, is it to criticise or complain? Frequent, constructive feedback and genuine praise build self-esteem. Another tool is the "I-statement" approach instead of "you-statements." For example, if Jane takes someone's pen without asking:

a) Say the student's name and wait for eye contact.
b) Label the behaviour: "You took her pen without asking."
c) State the effect on peers: "When you do that, she feels it is stealing and gets upset."
d) State the effect on you: "I have to stop helping X to sort this out, and that feels like an inappropriate use of time."
e) Direct the expected behaviour: "Please return her pen, then ask politely if you may borrow it."

"I-statements" shift the focus from judging the person to addressing the behaviour that needs to change.

5) Foster early team building

Encouraging team success is another way to alleviate negative stress in the classroom. For instance, instead of having your top group do an exercise with twelve questions individually, invite the group to finish the task within a set time and explain that the only way it can be done is if each person tackles different questions—the first three, the next three, and so on. Then ask the group to listen to each answer and agree on its accuracy before submitting the work as complete. Praising and/or rewarding the group for working together and completing the task on time promotes good team spirit and a sense of shared accomplishment.

We will examine the concept of group work further in Part 5, *Structured-Social Interaction*.

Minimising negative stress keeps students' protective reflexes at bay and frees their conscious minds for learning. Consistent routines, calm starts, fair rules, genuine praise, and purposeful collaboration all help students relax—and therefore engage—fully.

PART THREE

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PERSON

During a peer-mentoring session with a colleague at a school in the 1980s, I was asked to become aware of my opening and closing routines as a class teacher. If anyone had asked, I would have said that I acted as gatekeeper and greeted each student as they entered the room. However, as a result of peer observation I realised that, more often than not, my first words to students were instructions like “Tuck in your shirt” or “Spit out that gum.”

I wondered what message I was sending. Given that students were, essentially, guests in my room for an hour, how welcome did I make them feel? Did I even make eye contact as they entered? Or was I busy near my desk, getting things ready and glancing up only to bark an instruction? And during the lesson, did I acknowledge everyone’s presence, or did some students become almost invisible because they quietly got on with things while the misbehaving others drew my attention?

This led me to consider how often I was **acknowledging the person** behind the learner. I knew their names and grades, but how much did I really know about the individuals I taught? Take the quietest student: did I know their hobbies and interests? Their favourite colour? Their biggest fear? Their aspirations?

I soon realised that, while I knew some surface details, I understood little about their true personalities. So I created a questionnaire, asking them to share whatever they felt comfortable sharing—favourite movies or TV shows, learning preferences, opinions about what they were studying, and a few questions on sports, fashion, and hobbies.

I then collated the data—not just to learn about my students but to see how it might inform my teaching. Although it took time to analyse their responses, I was glad I made the effort. I suddenly had ways to engage students more during lessons and even capture the interest of reluctant learners. I discovered, for instance, that over 80 percent of an all-boys class enjoyed watching wrestling. Most of my Year 9 class preferred comedies. I asked myself: if I linked school learning to out-of-school interests, would engagement rise?

The answer was an emphatic **yes**. Reluctant readers focused better when texts reflected their interests. I set comprehensions using wrestling-magazine articles, used wrestling terms when teaching metaphor and simile, and wove wrestling into as many areas as possible. The same class

enjoyed motocross, so I used that as another springboard. For Year 9, I sourced texts by favourite comedians and comics to teach grammar.

Of course, keeping up with students' interests takes effort and may feel daunting. For me, though, it improved behaviour and attention, so it was worth it.

Another clear way to acknowledge the person is to greet every student by name. Imagine how you would feel if the head teacher stood at the staff-room door and the first words you heard were, "Tidy your hair!" Compare that with, "Good morning, Mrs Smith—nice to see you! Here's to a great day!" Greeting each person individually goes a long way toward a friendly classroom atmosphere.

Additionally, aim to speak to each student one-to-one as often as possible. When the class is "getting on with things," seize the chance to chat briefly about their work. When students see you moving around the room to talk with everyone, they're more inclined to make progress before you reach them. Sitting at your desk during independent work misses opportunities for formative dialogue.

You can also invite students to reply to your written feedback, creating a written conversation. End your comments with a question they need to answer—perhaps asking whether they agree with an observation or how they plan to use the feedback.

Finally, here are some questions to consider when personalising learning. Imagine they come from a reluctant learner, and use them to create your own questionnaire or reflection tool:

1. Do you provide opportunities for me to display my real interests?
2. Am I allowed to express my feelings about how and what I am learning?
3. Do you praise and reward more than you punish and chastise?
4. When you mark my work, do you also highlight what I did well?
5. Do you know what frightens me most in life?
6. I enjoy a variety of learning experiences—do you offer them?
7. Is it safe for me to make mistakes in your class?
8. Do I have any say in how work is approached?
9. Are my achievements outside the classroom recognised at school?
10. Do I have input into negotiated rules?
11. How often in a lesson do you speak to me?
12. Does my opinion matter?

PART FOUR

ILLUMINATING THE WAY FORWARD

Roger Sperry's research into brain hemispheres introduced the idea that each hemisphere carries specific functions. The left hemisphere, he claimed, is responsible for, among other things, understanding lists, recognising words, and noticing details. The right hemisphere was thought to specialise in processing pictures, colours, rhythm, and concepts. Over the years this theory was elaborated, and many educationalists clung to the notion that each hemisphere **only** dealt with its own preferences.

Later research has shown the left-right hemispheric theory to be too simplistic; the functions of each hemisphere—and the way they interact—are far more complex than first thought. (Current neuroscience emphasises extensive cross-talk between hemispheres.) What researchers do agree on is that our brains are wired to handle **PARTS and WHOLES**: the left tends to favour parts, the right wholes. Evidence also shows that if one hemisphere is damaged, the other can compensate, sometimes taking over the missing functions.

We also know that some learners prefer parts—understanding details—while others prefer wholes—seeing the big picture. Different labels (analysts vs. theorists, dreamers vs. realists, divergent vs. convergent thinkers) all circle back to this parts-and-wholes idea.

So in any classroom there will be students who want the big picture before starting a new topic and others content to let details unfold.

Teachers need to provide for both preferences when introducing a new section, unit, or chapter.

I found the following simple process useful when planning a new unit. It has three phases:

1. **BEFORE**
2. **WHY**
3. **KNOW**

- **BEFORE** provides the context of the learning.
- **WHY** gives reasons for the learning.
- **KNOW** identifies what people already know before mapping a route to the outcomes.

Let's look at these in turn.

1) BEFORE

Big-picture learners like to understand what has gone before and what comes next. Placing learning in context shows that no work stands alone and that all learning is connected.

One way is to use a **mind map** showing a breakdown of the unit's content. Benefits:

a) It's easy to refer to where you are and how it fits the whole.
b) Students use peripheral vision to remember the overall picture because the mind map is constantly referenced.

Another approach is a **Noughts-and-Crosses grid**:

- Draw a grid. In the centre square, put the topic title; in the eight surrounding squares, list the topic's components.
- Draw three more grids above; in the centre of each, place the components from the original top row, then break each of these into its sub-components.
- Do the same for the remaining original components around the main grid.

You end up with one main grid surrounded by eight minor grids, letting everyone see how all components fit.

Providing the big picture also reduces negative stress: students feel safer when they see the "street map" of their learning. The big picture can include not just content but also the skills and outcomes required for different levels or grades.

2) WHY

Understanding *why* something is worth learning is crucial for motivation and achievement. The WHY phase invites students to connect the lesson with their aspirations. Learners who like rationalising new work need clear reasons.

A brief anecdote: while mentoring a primary colleague in Kennington, London, I watched her introduce calculation. She asked why adding and subtracting mattered. After a few basic answers, she gave one child 20 pence and told him he could buy a lolly for 5 pence and keep the change. She handed him a 5 pence coin. It took moments for classmates to realise he'd been short-changed; hands shot up. When asked again why arithmetic mattered, the boy replied, "So I know if I'm getting the right change." Even very young students need real-world reasons.

Telling students they need knowledge "for the exam" rarely inspires. They engage when they see how learning affects real life.

A helpful structure is the **Metacognitive Application Process**:

- **WHY?** Use the *Why? Why? Why?* technique — keep asking why until the real value emerges.
- **WHAT?** Break the unit into recognisable chunks — including expected *outputs* for formative assessment.
- **HOW?** Show different ways students will demonstrate learning or approach tasks.
- **WHAT IF?** Let students propose alternate pathways or methods, showing there are multiple routes to understanding.

3) KNOW

Always start a topic by exploring what students already know. *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice* (NRC, 1999) notes that activating prior knowledge is vital:

"Students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works… If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp new concepts… or revert to preconceptions outside the classroom."

Having students record existing knowledge lets you then ask what they want to discover, helping structure the curriculum around their curiosity. Teaching content they already know risks boredom.

Documenting what students know, want to know, and how they'll find out provides rich formative data. During assessment they can reflect on the process, celebrate successes, and plan improvements, building a record of each student's learning journey.

CREATE A ROUTE MAP

Design a visual map that shows:

1. **Starting Point** – where you are now.
2. **Destination** – what you need to know or be able to do.
3. **Route** – how to get there.
4. **Markers** – signposts along the way ("show-you-know" opportunities indicating success criteria).

Students can create individual route maps or co-create one as a class for a topic or theme.

PART FIVE

STRUCTURING SOCIAL INTERACTION

I have called this part "structured social interaction" because I feel it describes the dynamics of group work better than simply saying "group work."

I can remember feeling quite pleased with my planning, as an NQT, when I could show an inspector that I had differentiated three ways in my lessons and that three groups were focused on work targeted to their abilities. I had the students sitting in groups and was delighted with their behaviour during an inspection—you could hear a pin drop as they quietly got on with their work.

If you had asked me, I would have pointed to them as an example of group work in my classroom. Group A, I would have said, is the top group, busy with a task suited to their abilities. Group B is the middle-ability group, engaged in an exercise matched to their capabilities. I even would have said they were working well because they were working quietly.

And you probably would have told me—as did the inspector—that there is no such thing as quiet group work.

"How," the inspector asked, "are the individuals within each group learning about the dynamics of group work? How are they developing listening and negotiating skills? How are they learning to compromise and understand what makes an effective team member?"

He listed a host of other essential skills enriched through **active** group work, and it dawned on me that, while I had differentiated by content, I had not planned for personal-skill development or given students opportunities to understand each other as learners. (I also realised I should be setting tasks slightly above their supposed ability level, to stretch and challenge them.)

After that inspection I began to plan differently—hence my preference for the term *structured social interaction*, which supplies three useful planning elements:

1. **Structured**
2. **Social**
3. **Interaction**

Structured

This refers to having clear phases that groups move through together. For example, I gave a Year 11 class the task of deciding whether a two-minute video clip was factual or staged. Their task structure was:

- **Observe** – watch in silence.
- **Think & Question** – watch again, jotting interesting questions.
- **Share & Listen** – in circle-time format, take turns sharing questions; no answering yet.
- **Evaluate & Report** – each states a point of view with a reason; after all have spoken, the group decides which viewpoint is most convincing.

Having a structure—whatever form it takes—keeps groups focused and purposeful. Safe routines such as circle time ensure every opinion has value.

A handy planning frame:

- **First, they will …**
- **Then, they will …**
- **After that, they will …**
- **Finally, they will …**

Students should know the structure in advance; timing guidelines for each phase can help.

Social

Group work should build *individuals-within-teams* skills.

a) Agree on rules of conduct
A poster that shifted some students' attitudes read:

You don't ever have to respect my opinion—you need only respect my right to express it.

Circle time is useful here: sitting in a circle, using a talking stick, each person speaks in turn without interruption.

Example: read a student's writing and ask the group to

- Share what they liked most (round 1)
- Suggest one improvement (round 2)

b) Agree on criteria for effective group work
Have each group define what makes one-star versus five-star group work, record it on a poster, and self-rate at the end of each session. Over time, criteria usually become sharper and more realistic.

c) Agree on trouble-shooting strategies
Groups decide how to respond if they can't agree, someone isn't pulling their weight, or a member dominates. Recording these strategies in a mini guidebook encourages ownership.

d) Rotate assigned roles
Roles (writer, reporter, researcher, referee, time-keeper, etc.) can be printed on cards. Rotate regularly and let students evaluate how well each role was performed.

Interaction

Group work will be noisy in the productive sense—students negotiating, agreeing, disagreeing, sharing views. Plan tasks that require speaking and listening.

a) The Reflective Observer
One student steps back from the task, observing and noting:

- How the group tackled the task
- Questions asked
- Quality of interaction
- Sequence of speakers

The observer then reports back.

b) Assigning Traits
The observer labels each member with an animal metaphor that captures their behaviour (e.g., "owl" for thoughtful, "dolphin" for collaborative). Surprisingly, students use this with candour rather than cruelty.

c) Moving Markers
Each member places a small object (e.g., a sharpener) in front of them. The closer the marker is to the person, the more involved they feel. Pushing it toward the centre signals disengagement, helping teachers or group leaders spot and address uneven participation.

Structured social interaction nurtures listening, negotiating, compromising, role flexibility, and problem-solving—skills that students carry far beyond the classroom.

PART SIX

ENCOURAGING AND REWARDING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

When I grew up in the 1980s, the focus was very much on achieving, on "being the best," on ruthlessly getting to the top no matter what. At school there was an atmosphere of competition—those of us who were academically inclined were not satisfied unless we were getting all As and saw a C as a kind of failure.

Accordingly, our school awarded high achievers with certificates and trophies. I received awards for coming first in Art, History, and English. Looking back, I'm surprised at how obsessed I was with the notion of *coming first*.

I began my teaching career at the end of the 1980s, just as values were changing, yet in my early years I was still tempted to reward only those who achieved As while almost ignoring students whose steady effort moved them from an E to a D.

It took time to realise that students who make gradual progress need as much praise and reward as those who top the class. Once I recognised even tiny improvements, I saw that these students were more likely to keep trying. In fact, when I celebrated every step forward—no matter how small—progress became more sustained than when I praised only the highest achievers.

A Monday-Morning Example

Monday mornings in my English classes meant spelling tests and new weekly word lists. Early on, I rewarded top scores with chocolates, but the same small handful of students kept winning and many others lost interest.

Then one morning I presented the results like a radio **Top 20** countdown. The class was hooked:

"And this week, rising three places from last week's number 14 to number 11 is …"

Students began to take pride in climbing even in one place. They loved seeing an upward arrow next to their name. If someone scored 5 out of 20 one week and 6 the next, I made a celebratory fuss — "Onwards and upwards!" became my catch-phrase.

I asked students to reflect on how they could improve their spelling, aiming for one mark higher the following week. Soon, ideas poured in: cue cards, daily practice with parents, Post-it notes on cereal boxes. Recognising *all* improvements fuelled motivation. Some students even set ambitious targets —"No, I want to try for 12 or 13 next time."

Continuous improvement thrives when every step is noticed, encouraged, and praised.

Ideas to Support Recognition and Reward

1. **Get other staff members to praise students**
   Let colleagues know that a student has moved up two places in the spelling test and ask them to congratulate that student when they meet. Imagine how valued a student feels when several teachers acknowledge their effort during the day.
2. **Call home (or send a quick message) to share good news**
   Positive phone calls, texts, or LMS messages turn the usual "bad-news call" paradigm on its head. They also let you discuss targets for the next week—e.g., encouraging parents to help a student move from 9/20 to 10/20.
3. **Create a Recognition Board**
   Dedicate classroom space to students making steady gains. If you already display top scores, balance it with a board celebrating gradual improvement.
4. **Use Consequence Sacks**
   Prepare three small bags:
   - **Red** for misbehaviour (punishments)
   - **Green** for high achievement (rewards)
   - **Blue** for incremental improvement (rewards)

   Rewards might include sweets, free-time cards, positive phone calls, or raffle tickets for a weekly prize.

Recognising and rewarding continuous improvement keeps every learner engaged—whether they're nudging their score from 5 to 6 or sprinting from 18 to 20—and fosters a classroom culture where progress, not perfection, is the shared goal.

Final Thoughts

Teaching isn't a fixed set of strategies. It's a daily act of noticing. Of adjusting. Of trying again.

The PRAISE model isn't a checklist or a programme — it's a reminder. A way to stay grounded in what really matters when things get noisy, pressured, or just plain difficult. Promote the positive. Reduce stress. Acknowledge the person. Illuminate the way forward. Structure social interaction. Encourage continuous improvement. Not one of those is ever truly 'done'. They're all ongoing — habits to return to and rework, not hoops to jump through.

Classrooms change. Timetables shift. Some weeks feel smooth, others like wading through treacle. And just when we think we've got the rhythm right, it shifts again. That's the nature of it. And also the privilege.

So maybe start small. One area. One gentle change. A smile at the door that's a beat longer than usual. A quiet word with a student who's gone unnoticed. A short activity that lets them connect as people, not just learners. See what happens.

This booklet wasn't written to offer a method — but a lens. A way of seeing what already works in your classroom, and what might work even better with just a little nudge. Because when we get the atmosphere right — calm, clear, kind — the learning starts to take care of itself.

And that's always been the goal.

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