

# **YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING**

## **PAST EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE ATTITUDES IN LITERACY**

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Learning how to read and write is universal and personal all at once. We all have memories of how we obtained literacy, but did those experiences shape the basis of how we feel toward literacy in the future? Did the praise or discouragement we obtained lead us to certain attitudes? While there have been studies done in this area, none seem to focus on people's actual physical experiences of praise versus discouragement. This distinction became clear in my own study of written literacy narratives and interviews, thus creating a clearer picture of the role of praise in literacy attainment that both supports and extends previous research findings.

It's easy to overlook and take for granted the complexity of the process of learning how to read and write and ultimately become literate. At such a young age we learn to do such incredible things. There are usually many people playing different roles in teaching literacy to young children: mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, teachers, and so on. In *Language and Literacy in the Early Years*, Marian R. Whitehead argues that we make associations with books and the people reading them to us at those early stages in life. In "Child Development and Emergent Literacy," Grover Whitehurst, the first director of the Institute of Education Sciences, and Christopher Lonigan, a leading researcher in the areas of preschool literacy instruction and assessment, describe the labyrinth of processes taking place from before preschool into kindergarten that children go through when learning literacy. Starting with gaining knowledge of the alphabet and progressing to inventive spelling and associating written words with meanings, the acquisition of literacy is a highly complicated process indeed.

As you can imagine, everyone goes through the learning process differently and, in turn, runs across different experiences when doing so. Learning how to do anything involves emotional development, and at such a young age children are sensitive toward doing things right or wrong. Critiquing children with the sincerity and outspokenness you would adults or teens could potentially crush their fragile egos, making them feel less able. Being aware of the emotional and delicate side of learning literacy is vital.

If we can find similarities existing within a substantial sample of literacy histories, then it would help us gain a clearer picture of if and how our past experiences in literacy have influencing capabilities. Two researchers who have conducted studies like this are Rick Evans and Alisa Belzer. In Evans's study he gained a knowledge of numerous middle-class college students' literacy histories through detailed questionnaires and interviews about how and what they read and wrote in the past. He focused mainly on three different types of reading and writing, analyzing how students encounter them and how their feelings toward them differ. Belzer's study focused on in-depth interviews with five African American women. She wanted to compare their past experiences with their

present attitudes toward literacy as adults to look for patterns and gain ideas for more effective adult literacy education.

While I didn't want to reproduce the same study as Evans and Belzer, I did use similar methods. To begin my study, I acquired eight "literacy reflections" from other students in English 2010 at Utah Valley University (UVU). In these literacy reflections students were asked to reflect on their literacy pasts and presents, to explore how they read and write different assignments, and their feelings and attitudes toward reading and writing. As with Evans's and Belzer's studies, the intent was to get students thinking about the different kinds of reading and writing they do and why they do it. I was hoping that by studying these students' reflections I would be able to see patterns of past experiences playing an influential role in how these college students felt toward different literacy tasks.

I then interviewed twelve other people of all different ages, ranging from eleven to forty-four. I did this because I wanted not only college students' perspectives on writing but also those of children at all levels of learning and adults at different points in their lives. I wanted to interview people who were not given the assignment to write a paper on their literacy histories in order to remove bias from the study. Evans's and Belzer's articles both interview relevant groups of people (mainstream college students around eighteen years old and middle-aged African American women), but I wanted to show that no matter what stage of life we are in, we all have a literacy past that potentially affects our future, even well past the schooling part of our lives. Therefore, I interviewed two girls in the fifth grade, four kids in high school, and three people in college (I interviewed fewer college students because I felt that I had a good representation of them from the literacy reflections). I also interviewed three people who were thirty-three and older and out of college because I hypothesized that even when you're out of school, your literacy past still play a role in your life. I began each interview by asking about the participants' earliest memories of reading and whom they remembered teaching them. I asked them about their favorite and least favorite teachers and why they liked or disliked them. I also got an idea of how their reading styles had changed—for example, what their favorite kinds of books were when they were children compared to their favorites now. I asked the same kinds of questions concerning writing, too. We talked about what kinds of writing they enjoyed in the past compared to now, what kinds of writing they make time for in their schedule, etc. I wanted to get a good feel for which experiences with literacy learning the interviewees remembered most clearly in order to determine if a lot of people remembered the same kinds of experiences. I also asked them about any awards or recognition they received in classes in certain subjects to see if that affected their subsequent aptitude and interest in them. I wanted to know not only how they responded to recognition in literacy but also how they pursued it, so I asked them if they showed what they'd written to teachers and friends or talked about what they were reading to others.

After reading through all the literacy reflections and reviewing the interviews, it became clear that there was one event that everyone seemed to have gone through in one way or another. It was also addressed in both Belzer's and Evans's interviews within their studies. All interviewees talked about an experience with a teacher—either one that had influenced them to continue using their successful literacy skills, or one that had made them feel lost and hopeless about reading or writing. The students who had teachers discourage them suffered a loss in their confidence and became weary about their writing. One of the women Belzer interviewed talked about an embarrassing situation in which she read in front of the class, revealing how badly it affected her emotionally and

physically. Something Evans's and Belzer's articles didn't do was examine in depth what occurs in your body, chemically, when you are praised and feeling good versus being discouraged and feeling bad. It's a valid thing to think about when looking into praise and how it may motivate you. Your body is responding to your situation, and I don't know about you, but if my body is responding in a way that's negative I doubt I will want to do whatever is causing it again. Dr. David Yells, associate professor and chair of the Department of Behavioral Science at UVU, said that while we have plenty of research results on the body's response to positive experiences, there is little data available on negative responses because it would be inhumane to test on people or animals. He did say that the central nervous system's response to situations like being called on in class could be looked at as bad if it is a particularly embarrassing situation. Your central nervous system reacts and you blush, get sweaty palms, stutter, etc.

I also noticed that everyone's really bad or really good experiences with literacy were recalled with great detail, as if they had happened yesterday. How could they remember them so clearly? In "Getting the Brain's Attention," Ingrid Wickelgren argues that dopamine is "a neurotransmitter supposed to react on the brain's reward system to produce feelings of pleasure" (1). It is released into the nucleus accumbens, which is known to be activated by pleasurable behaviors. Wickelgren also states that there is new data suggesting that dopamine released in the brain draws attention to certain significant or surprising events and that dopamine cells respond to reward only when it happens unpredictably. Some scientists believe dopamine causes frontal neurons to hold onto some temporary memories for longer, which may make them easier to remember in the future. Could the dopamine released during our experiences of learning literacy be why we remember those experiences so well? These good or bad experiences the students had with literacy probably stuck with them because of the impact they had on their self-confidence: good or bad. In fact, dopamine delivers a message while other parts of the brain respond with emotion; whether that be pleasure, excitement, or fear depends on the situation (6).

From my study of multiple literacy narratives, I have found a recurring pattern: when students were good at certain literacy skills and it was brought to theirs and others' attention, it resulted in positive literacy growth. The following pages highlight some of those occurrences.

The fifth grade girls I interviewed talked about being most interested in reading and writing that involved everyone and showed them to shine above others. One of the girls talked excitedly about her reading skills and accomplishments, but when I asked her about writing her attitude changed. She said she has not received feedback about her writing but that her teachers and friends always talked about how well and how much she reads.

One of the Brigham Young University students I interviewed is minoring in editing, so you can imagine what her literacy skills are like. She loves to read and write and is very skilled at both. She's received abundant amounts of praise in the form of words and awards. She entered a story into a Disney writing contest when she was in her teens; although she didn't win, she was praised immensely by her family for entering the contest. Her award-winning poems are framed and hanging up in her grandparents' and parents' homes. She loves to read history books and has always been described by her parents and friends as "a reader."

The older people I interviewed were very enthusiastic and excited to look back at their literacy pasts. Although sometimes it took a little longer for them to remember details, their answers were very similar to those I had gotten from the younger students. All of them grew up in homes where reading was encouraged greatly. One of them even said that her mom would buy her a book

at the store instead of candy. Another said that he couldn't remember having any bad experiences with reading when he was younger and was quite good at it. His writing wasn't as important to himself and others until he got into college, where he learned and excelled in writing for communications. He makes time in his busy schedule today for reading books and writing in his journal, both of which he enjoys doing very much. He also covers sports for the *Deseret Morning News*, a local paper in Utah.

It was very apparent after reading the literary reflections and reviewing the interviews that following a discouraging event when learning to read or write, most students felt incompetent or felt like something was wrong until an encouraging teacher or event came along. In contrast, one college student from the literacy reflections and three high schoolers from the interviews seemed never to have had a bad experience with reading or writing. The college student excelled in literacy at a young age and was awarded and praised for it continually. He still loves both reading and writing and is very confident in his abilities to do so. The three high schoolers are all very avid readers and writers. They all had been given awards for their proficient reading skills and creative writing. When I looked over the questions I had asked them dealing with their literacy pasts, I found a pattern of praise, starting from childhood and continuing through the rest of their schooling up to this point in their education. All of them had had different experiences, of course, but all of them were very positive. Their family and friends were all very supportive. Something else I noticed that was interesting was that all three of them had gotten an early start with their literacy skills, from either a phonics program, a computer program, or homeschooling. This enabled them to have teaching opportunities with other kids in their classes who may have been struggling, therefore making them feel happy and good about their advantage in literacy skills. Dopamine release could play a part here as well as praise received for their accomplishments.

An article by Jennifer Henderlong, an assistant professor of psychology at Reed College, and Mark Lepper, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, both supported most of my findings and contradicted a few. They talk about the negative and positive effects of praise, motivation, and sincerity on children. When children sense insincerity in praise, it is disregarded and turned into negative motivation. Henderlong and Lepper stated that the older the child is, the more likely he or she is to think about what the praise could mean and take it wrong, while younger kids do not really look into complexities of praise (778). According to Henderlong and Lepper, praise could be motivating if it's guiding children to feel capable and not comparing them to others' progress (785), but in my research the students seemed to enjoy being compared to others. The students highlighted some kind of class progress chart for reading, explaining that being ahead of others felt very rewarding and influenced them to pursue energetic reading. It seems that effective praise depends on how it is delivered and the situation and people it involves. Praise can lead to motivation and be a great tool when done right. You have to consider the environment and factors that could alter your desired effect on the child you are praising.

Belzer concluded in her study that schoolwork needs to be applicable in and out of school. Students should be able to find connections with their schoolwork and how it may apply in their own lives. Out of my interviewees and Belzer's, there was only one person who enjoyed or looked forward to reading things that she was assigned to read at school, or writing things that she was assigned to write (on topics not of her choosing). This particular person said that what she read from her textbooks was interesting and it did not bother her to read them. In her family they are expected to do very well in all their classes and be honor students. She's the youngest in her fam-

ily, and all of her brothers and sisters have been 4.0 students. It doesn't surprise me that she's more willing to read and learn from the material she is given in classes than the other high schoolers. If other students were in her position, I'm sure they'd feel that if they didn't get good grades they would be performing inadequately or disappointing their parents and might be teased or pressured by siblings. Two of the college students I interviewed, like the high school girl above, grew up in homes where doing very well was an expectation as well. They were both praised and encouraged for their achievements in literacy while growing up, but it was more of a requirement than an accomplishment.

The rest of the high schoolers and college students said they would do the assigned work, and most of them got good grades for their efforts, but they did not enjoy it and considered it almost irrelevant to their lives. Students in Evans's interviews and my own were similar in that they tended to write things that they knew their teachers would want and not what they really thought. During a good portion of our schooling, we're learning how to write the kinds of papers that we would never use in our everyday lives. Yet the experiences we have while learning how to write those kinds of papers can discourage us from reading and writing throughout the rest of our lives.

During the process of writing this essay, I found my own experience representing exactly what I have been researching. I've never thought of myself as being a writer. Back in elementary school was the only time I remember being excited about writing. My first grade teacher loved my stories and always shared them with my parents during parent-teacher conferences. She made me feel like writing was something special and I was very good at it. Other than that, I wasn't really encouraged to write or praised for my efforts as much as my siblings were. Parents are supposed to support you in your endeavors, so it was harder for me to take their opinions as seriously as teachers or peers. So I dropped that off of my list of things that I was good at. When I wrote papers for classes, I was always self-conscious about them and hated other people reading them. I assumed they just were not very good or had anything special about them compared to those of other students. I never received bad grades on papers, but I never had feedback, either. Therefore, I assumed my teachers probably were not really reading them or, frankly, just passed out As to almost everyone in class. Only when I continued getting As for my college papers and started getting positive feedback from my college professors did I begin to believe I actually could write. Then, during the process of writing this paper, I received a lot of compliments, encouragement, and praise for my writing abilities from my professor as well as my relatives, friends, and peers. This made me start feeling even better and a lot more confident in my writing. The dopamine in my brain was definitely flowing. I felt a rush of energy and happiness whenever I got papers back that had positive feedback, which encouraged me further. Now I want to write more and make time to do further research on this subject as well as others.

Assessing the research, literacy reflections, and interviews, it's apparent that past experiences with learning literacy appeared to play a role in these people's future attitudes toward reading and writing and that praise continues to change your attitudes throughout your entire learning experience.

I wonder how parents and teachers can sometimes be careless toward something so obvious but so consequential, like praise. Praise and encouragement should be taken into more consideration when teaching literacy. As I said before, parents and teachers play a huge role in helping their child develop a healthy relationship with writing. Literacy is an integral part of a successful future for everyone. Something like that should be handled with as much care as other aspects of life.

Literacy really does affect us emotionally, physically, and socially. The experiences we have with it growing up create a strong literacy backbone and good attitude that we may not be able to gain later on in life. It may even affect how we teach it to our future children.

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