The Perceived Effectiveness of Rewards and Sanctions in Primary Schools: adding in the parental perspective

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The Perceived Effectiveness of Rewards and Sanctions in Primary Schools: adding in the parental perspective

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ABSTRACT A number of recent studies have investigated the opinions of pupils about effective rewards and sanctions available within schools. One recurring finding is that pupils consider information sent from school to their parents commending good work and behaviour, or criticising unsatisfactory performance, to be the most, or among the most, effective rewards and sanctions respectively. Whilst previous studies have suggested that some teachers do not expect positive, home-based reinforcement strategies to be effective, the views of parents have not been systematically explored. If schools wish to capitalise on pupils' recognition of information being sent home as a powerful reward and sanction, as many recent publications encourage, then it is important to ascertain whether or not parents also recognise this potency. The present study thus examines parental perspectives, using similar methods to those employed in previous studies of teacher–pupil concordance over effective rewards and sanctions. In addition, it serves as a replication of these teacher–pupil studies. A survey within one inner-city primary school of 49 pupils, six teachers and 64 parents or guardians shows parents and their children to be in strong agreement over the effectiveness of possible school-initiated rewards, but in considerable disagreement over sanctions. In common with previous studies of pupils and teachers, parents also rate information being sent home as the most effective reward for encouraging positive behaviour in school.

Schools should strike a healthy balance between rewards and punishments. Both should be clearly specified.


Discussions about the behaviour of pupils in schools, especially when that behaviour is deemed unacceptable by teachers, parents and other pupils, have a number of common starting points. One strand of thinking concerns itself with features of schools, as
reflected in the school effectiveness literature (Gray et al., 1996), or, less academically, in the conversation of parents around the school gate. The other major approach centres upon individual pupils, seeking to root explanations within either a moral, psychological or sociological framework. Despite their divergent focus, when seeking solutions to the problem of difficult pupil behaviour, both perspectives become drawn towards a consideration of rewards and sanctions available within a school.

For example, Galvin and Costa (1994), on the basis of an extended period of working with schools on these matters, recommend that interventions aimed at pupil behaviour should start with a consideration of school policies before moving to the class management skills of teachers. Only if interventions at these levels prove unsatisfactory, they argue, should strategies for managing individual pupils be considered. At each of these three levels, in the materials provided by Galvin and Costa, attention to rewards and sanctions is a central feature.

If practitioners consider rewards and sanctions to be essential features, then there needs to be some method for deciding what constitutes appropriate items within each category. A number of recent studies have investigated the opinions of pupils about effective rewards and punishments in secondary schools (Sharpe et al., 1987; Houghton et al., 1988; Caffyn, 1989) and in primary schools (Harrop & Williams, 1992; Merrett & Tang 1994). Clearly, the results of these studies should permit schools to strike not only a 'healthy balance' between rewards and punishments, but, perhaps more importantly, to include items which command credibility and acceptability among their pupils.

One particular finding occurs again and again in all these studies—that pupils consider information sent to their homes commending good work or complaining about unsatisfactory performance to be the most, or one of the most, effective rewards and punishments respectively. However, acknowledging the perspective of pupils in the quest for an agreed basis to a school's policy has also run into a recurring problem. Some studies have in addition investigated teachers' views about effective rewards and punishments (Highfield & Pinsent, 1952; Caffyn, 1989) or the frequency with which they use various approaches (Harrop & Williams, 1992). These studies have shown that positive information sent home is not considered by teachers to be a particularly potent reward or to be used frequently although a complaint home is relatively common (Harrop & Williams, 1992).

Approaches which address difficult behaviour by attending to the individual pupil—in effect, behavioural approaches—are, of course, inevitably bound up with considerations of rewards and sanctions. Although the main interest within the behavioural literature has centred upon contingencies available to classroom teachers, another line of development which is supported by a particularly positive research literature—home-based reinforcement (H-BR)—also draws attention back to the role of parents. Basically, in H-BR, the teacher is responsible for specifying classroom rules, for deciding whether these have been followed or broken and for communicating this information to a child's parent(s). At home, the parents are responsible for consistently dispensing previously agreed rewards and sanctions to the child, based on the teacher's information. Reviewing both controlled experiments and detailed case studies, Atkeson and Forehand (1979) and Barth (1979) showed that H-BR schemes consistently led to improved pupil behaviour, so much so that Barth exclaimed that "the widespread application of this system need wait no longer."

Despite the arguments for incorporating parents into plans for improving pupils' behaviour, the practice of doing so has often encountered serious obstacles. As the
'reward preference' studies quoted earlier have shown, teachers often do not choose positive information home as a reward nor judge that it will be effective. However, studies which have looked at the types of pupil behaviour that teachers and parents identify as causing them difficulties have often revealed consistent disparities between groups of teachers and parents (Rutter et al., 1970; McGee et al., 1983; Tizard et al., 1988). For example, in a longitudinal study of 343 London children (Tizard et al., 1988) teachers saw 34% of the children at the end of their top infant year as having a mild or a definite behaviour problem and parents identified 22%. However, only 30% of those seen by teachers as a problem at school were also seen as problems at home and only 34% of those identified by parents were similarly perceived as difficult by teachers. Tizard et al. suggest that some types of behaviour, such as a lack of concentration, may be more of a problem in the school setting than at home and that other types, such as fooling around or nervousness and withdrawal, may just be more likely to occur at school.

An inability to agree that a pupil is presenting difficulties at school may well interfere with the establishment of a positive working relationship between teachers and parents and, hence, prevent the more widespread take-up of such methods as H-BR, as advocated by Barth (1979). However, this barrier to progress is likely to be further strengthened by the attribution processes employed by many teachers to account for difficult pupil behaviour. Croll and Moses (1985) surveyed 428 junior class teachers in 61 schools across 10 Local Education Authorities in order to examine mainstream teachers' knowledge and practice in respect of special educational needs. The teachers were asked to give their explanations for the special needs of children in their classes and the picture to emerge was a very clear one. Behaviour or discipline problems in children were seen in two-thirds of cases to be due to home factors, in a third to two-fifths to 'within-child' factors, and in only 2% to 4% of cases to any school or teacher factors (including previous schools or teachers).

Similarly, the Elton Committee (DES, 1989, p. 133) concluded "... our evidence suggests that teachers' picture of parents is generally very negative. Many teachers feel that parents are to blame for much misbehaviour in schools. We consider that, while this picture contains an element of truth, it is distorted." Once established, such attributions of parents by teachers may prove very resistant to modification. Miller (1995) conducted an interview study with 24 teachers who had taken part in highly successful H-BR schemes, many of them involving a number of meetings with parents and an educational psychologist. Despite witnessing parents carrying out their part of the strategy and attesting to the high degree of partnership taking place, very few of the teachers were able to attribute any of the pupils' actual improved behaviour to these parental contributions. Evidence emerged from the interviews to show that staff cultures in the schools operated in such a way as to maintain a construction of the parents of pupils who displayed difficult behaviour as being primarily responsible for the origins of this behaviour, but incapable of exerting any positive influence over its course of development (Miller, 1996).

In the light of these negative and enduring attributions, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of practitioners and action researchers have experienced considerable difficulties in bringing together the parents and teachers of pupils who have been judged disruptive in school. For example, Kolvin et al., (1981) attempted to investigate the most effective methods for helping secondary-age pupils exhibiting difficult behaviour in schools and found that joint teacher–parent approaches could be characterised by 'mutual distrust and prejudice' which necessitated on the part of the researcher 'great
diplomacy and caution'. Similarly, Dowling and Taylor (1989), offering an advisory service to parents within a London primary school concluded that "... the seemingly humble goal of reopening communication between parents and teachers must not be underestimated" (p. 26). And finally, Coulby and Harper (1985, p. 14), reviewing the work of a team of behaviour support teachers and educational psychologists offering a service to some 80 primary and 15 secondary schools in London, noted that:

There is still a tendency in many schools, after a particularly stormy episode, to summon parents to the head’s office, in the hope that giving them a tongue-lashing will prove more effective than administering the same to their offspring. In such parental ‘interviews’ the values of the school and the home can be brought into sharp opposition. The results can range from sullen resentment to mutual blame.

Clearly, effective and mutually satisfactory working relationships between teachers, pupils and parents is an educational ideal that is far from realised in those instances where pupils are judged by their teachers as displaying difficult behaviour in schools. Although such methods as H-BR appear to hold great potential, more is at present known about the barriers likely to sabotage these joint efforts than about the conditions likely to lead to their enthusiastic implementation. The present study attempts to make a contribution to this ambiguous and poorly understood area by extending the investigation of reward and sanction ‘preferences’ to include the perspective of parents. Given the recurring prominence of ‘information home’ within pupils’ preferred rewards but not within teachers’ usage, it is particularly important to ascertain whether parents share their children’s, or their children’s teachers’, perspectives, or whether they strike a position independent from both. All three potential outcomes have policy and practice implications.

Method

A number of recent studies have examined the relationship between the perceived effectiveness of rewards and punishments (e.g. Caffyn, 1989; Harrop & Williams, 1992). However, the statistical procedures used in the papers were not necessarily the most appropriate. These authors used Spearman’s Rho to calculate the degree of concordance between the measures. The design of their studies was between—subjects when correlational procedures (e.g. Rho) were designed essentially for within-subjects designs. When comparing the relative ranking provided by separate groups of raters (e.g. pupils, teachers, parents), then Kendall’s Tau is the preferred statistic of choice (Lehman, 1991). Consequently, the data in this study were analysed using Kendall’s Tau.

So that the results obtained from pupils and, in particular, parents in this study could be compared with those from pupils and teachers in others, the questionnaire used took as near as possible the same format as that of Harrop and Williams (1992). Slight alterations were made so that the rewards and punishments used would be recognised by respondents as being relevant to their school. The questionnaire used thus referred to nine rewards and 10 punishments as follows:

**Rewards**
- Praise in front of other children
- Private praise
Rewards and Sanctions

Good marks
Good written comments on your (their) work
Mentioned in assembly
Praised by other pupils
Whole class praised
Parents informed of your (their) good behaviour
Having your (their) work on display

Punishments
Being told off in front of the class
Being told off in private
Being sent to see the headteacher
Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in private
Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in front of the class
Kept in at playtime
Being moved to another seat in the classroom
Parents informed about your (their) naughty behaviour
Taking unfinished work to do in another class
Being stopped from going on a school trip

Wording on the questionnaires differed slightly between the three groups. Pupils were asked to rank the rewards and punishments in terms of their perceived effectiveness. Parents and teachers were asked to rank them in terms of their perceived usefulness. All groups were asked to rank both the reward and the punishments from the one they perceived as being the most useful/effective to the one they perceived as being the least useful/effective.

Setting and Access

The agreement of the headteacher of a primary school in an East Midlands inner city was obtained for the study. The researcher (RS) was already known by the teachers and many of the pupils to be involved in the study as she had been participating in voluntary work at the school for a considerable amount of time prior to the study.

Administration

Pupils

A total of 49 pupils (25 boys and 24 girls) from Year 5 and 6 classes were used. These included Year 4, 5 and 6 children. The children ranged in age from 8 years 5 months to 11 years 5 months, their mean age being 10 years 2 months. The children were from a mix of racial backgrounds, the most common being white, Asian and Afro-Carribean. An approximate indicator of socio-economic status of the families was obtained from their eligibility for free school meals, the rate being 48%

Materials. Sets of individual ‘flash cards’ were used by each child, each card having one of the 19 rewards or punishments written on it.
Procedure. Pupils were removed successively over a period of 2 days from their classes, in groups of between four and six. The purpose and an outline of the study was explained to each group and each child was asked if he or she was willing to participate.

Initially, each child was given a set of nine ‘flashcards’, one for each of the rewards. Children were then asked to arrange individually the cards on the table in a vertical manner, with the reward they considered most effective in helping them to work/behave better at the top and the one they considered the least effective at the bottom. It was stressed to the children that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. The completed rankings were then transferred onto a standard sheet.

The same procedure was then repeated so that each child also ranked the 10 punishments in the same manner.

Once the children’s rankings had been collected, each was given an envelope addressed ‘To the parent(s) or guardian(s) of [child’s name]’. The children were informed of the contents of the envelope and asked to take it home and ask (each of) their parent(s) to complete (one of) the enclosed questionnaires, which, apart from minor grammatical alterations, were identical to the sheets on which the children’s rankings were recorded.

Finally, the children were asked to return envelopes containing these completed parent questionnaires to their class teachers as soon as possible, but definitely within the following 10 days. The two classes were visited every other day during this 10-day period in an attempt to encourage/remind children to return these questionnaires. Incentives were also offered to the children, in an attempt to increase the parental response rate. All children were informed that those returning completed questionnaires within the 10-day period would have their names put into a prize draw to win one of four available £5 record vouchers.

Parents

At least one parent or guardian for 46 of the 49 pupils in the study completed questionnaires, the total number being 64 (43 females and 21 males).

Materials. Parents received an envelope containing a letter explaining the purpose of the study and assuring them of absolute confidentiality. Also enclosed were two identical questionnaires, one to be completed by each parent or guardian living in the house. Finally, an envelope, addressed to the researcher (c/o the school), was enclosed to enable parents to return their questionnaire(s) anonymously to school with their children.

Procedure. Parents or guardians received the questionnaires to complete via their children, as described earlier. The school was regularly visited in order to collect those which had been returned. The questionnaires were coded so that it could be established whether or not parents had returned at least one of the questionnaires. Parents who had failed to return a questionnaire within the 10 days were visited at home and, once again, the purpose of the study was explained to them and their co-operation requested.

Teachers

Six teachers who had regular contact with the pupil subjects were used. They consisted of four female and two male teachers.
Rewards and Sanctions

Table I. The relative effectiveness of school-initiated rewards as perceived by parents and children*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reward</th>
<th>Parents (N = 64)</th>
<th>Children (N = 49)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents informed of your (their) good behaviour</td>
<td>1 (3.2)</td>
<td>2 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good marks</td>
<td>2 (3.9)</td>
<td>1 (3.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good written comments on your (their) work</td>
<td>3 (3.9)</td>
<td>3 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise in front of other children</td>
<td>4 (4.4)</td>
<td>6 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in assembly</td>
<td>5 (4.4)</td>
<td>4 (4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having your (their) work on display</td>
<td>6 (4.5)</td>
<td>5 (5.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private praise</td>
<td>7 (6.1)</td>
<td>9 (6.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praised by other pupils</td>
<td>8 (6.2)</td>
<td>7 (5.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole class praised</td>
<td>9 (6.3)</td>
<td>8 (5.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ordering based on (mean rankings).

Materials. Each teacher received an envelope containing a letter, only minimally different to that received by the parents, explaining the purpose of the study, and with the assurance of confidentiality. Also enclosed was a questionnaire and envelope addressed to the researcher for the anonymous return of completed questionnaires.

Procedure. Questionnaires were given directly to the teachers at the school and, similarly, their completed returns were collected by the researcher on her visits to school.

Results

Table I presents the order based on mean rankings for rewards for the parent group set against the ordering produced by the children (i.e. 1 = reward judged most effective by this group). Kendall's Tau was calculated for the ordering of each separate reward by the parents and children groups. Rank ordering based on median and modal analysis was equivalent to that based on means. The analysis revealed that, for each reward, there were no significant differences in ranking by parents and children. Although the mean rank positions (see Table I) vary between each group, within each reward item there is no significant variation.

Whereas parents and pupils did not differ in the rank ordering within each reward, Table II shows a very different result for punishments. From the 10 suggested punishments, there was significant disagreement between the two groups over the relative weightings accorded to seven of the items.

In contrast to the high disagreement between parents and children concerning effective punishments, Table III shows that there is a stronger concordance between teachers and pupils, and teachers and parents. Whereas parents and children disagreed over seven items, teachers and children disagreed over only one. Teachers and parents also expressed more common ground, differing significantly in the rankings of only three items.

Discussion

In the rankings of rewards produced by the pupils and by their parents in Table I, the sending of positive information home, the item most pertinent to this paper, emerges
as the most effective within the judgement of both groups. In fact, this table shows that, with the high degree of concordance between parents and their children, reaching agreement between them about the most and least effective of the school-based rewards is highly unlikely to be problematic.

Table I shows that there is strong agreement between the pupils' rankings of rewards in this study and in those carried out by Harrop and Williams (1992) and Merrett and Tang (1994). In both the latter studies, 'parents being informed of good behaviour' gained the highest mean ranking and, notwithstanding a minimal difference between the means for the rewards ranked first and second by the pupils, this result is once again replicated. The order of rewards generated by the pupils in this study bears a very close resemblance to that produced in the research by Harrop and Williams (1992), thus providing further support for the generalisability of these pupil preferences.

### TABLE II. The relative effectiveness of school-initiated punishments as perceived by parents and children*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment Description</th>
<th>Parents (N = 64)</th>
<th>Children (N = 49)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents informed about your (their) naughty behaviour</td>
<td>1 (3.0)</td>
<td>2 (4.3)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sent to see the headteacher</td>
<td>2 (4.2)</td>
<td>5 (5.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in private</td>
<td>3 (4.7)</td>
<td>6 (5.6)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being told off in front of the class</td>
<td>4 (5.1)</td>
<td>4 (4.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being told off in private</td>
<td>5 (5.3)</td>
<td>8 (6.2)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kept in at playtime</td>
<td>6 (5.5)</td>
<td>9 (6.6)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in front of the class</td>
<td>7 (5.6)</td>
<td>3 (4.6)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being stopped from going on a school trip</td>
<td>8 (5.9)</td>
<td>1 (3.4)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being moved to another seat in the classroom</td>
<td>9 (6.2)</td>
<td>10 (7.5)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking unfinished work to do in another class</td>
<td>10 (6.5)</td>
<td>7 (6.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ordering based on (mean ranking).

+ Parents see as a significantly more effective punishment.

– Children see as a significantly more effective punishment.

### TABLE III. The relative effectiveness of school-initiated punishments as perceived by teachers compared to children and to parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment Description</th>
<th>Teachers/children</th>
<th>Teachers/parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents informed about your (their) naughty behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sent to see the headteacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being told off in private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being told off in front of the class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kept in at playtime</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explaining what is wrong with your (their) behaviour in front of the class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being stopped from going on a school trip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being moved to another seat in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking unfinished work to do in another class</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ Teachers see as a significantly more effective punishment than comparison group.

– Teachers see as a significantly less effective punishment than comparison group.
There is much less concordance between parents and their children in their views about school-generated punishments (Table II), with there being a significant disagreement over the relative weightings given to seven of the 10 items. Once again, though, the item concerning information being sent home was rated by parents as the most serious sanction available to schools from within the presented list. This item was also ranked on average in second place by the pupils. In the study by Merrett and Tang (1994), there was a tendency for pupils to see public reprimands as more effective than those given quietly and privately, and this trend is repeated in the present study.

An examination of the parents' four highest punishment rankings reveals a set of items that are all relatively private: being sent to the headteacher, information home and explanations and reprimands in private from the teacher, as opposed to more directly public pronouncements or to the withdrawal of privileges and treats such as being prevented from going on a school trip. On the contrary, three of the four sanctions most highly rated by the pupils were drawn directly from the more public items, repeating once again a finding from Merrett and Tang (1994).

Care must be taken in interpreting the results obtained from the teachers, given that the sample size was only six (compared to the eight in Harrop & Williams, 1992). However, it is interesting to note, given the focus of this study, that one of the areas of disagreement between the teachers and parents was over the perceived effectiveness, as a sanction, of sending information home (Table III). Once again, the teacher group saw this item as having less power, although in this study this is displayed in contrast to the parents.

Although the results from this study were obtained from only one inner-city primary school, the fact that many of the findings for the pupil group replicate earlier studies gives some degree of confidence that the parental views on desirable school-initiated rewards and sanctions may similarly be not unrepresentative of a wider body of parents. The central finding that parents concur with their children in pronouncing information sent home about good behaviour to be a highly effective reward, is important in providing further support for the potential power of H-BR schemes. However, the frequently stormy relationships that develop between parents and teachers when pupils are displaying difficult classroom behaviour suggests that skilled mediation and arbitration work by outside consultants, such as behaviour support teachers and educational psychologists, may be needed as a prerequisite to the implementation of these strategies (Miller, 1996).

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REFERENCES


