

# RJA1

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## Classroom Management – On the use of rewards and sanctions

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## Introduction

As Lord Elton (1989) has said in the behaviour inquiry he led, “bad behaviour in schools is a complex problem which does not lend itself to simple solutions.” For this reason, behaviour and its management in the classroom has been a topic of interest to many educational researchers, school leadership teams, officials, and of course, teachers. But what is “bad behaviour?” Steer (2009) often alludes to behaviour being “successful.” This is an interesting nuance between what is traditionally described as “good behaviour” and what Steer calls “successful behaviour.” How can new teachers achieve successful behaviour that lends itself to successful classrooms and students when it is such a “complex problem”? Since there are multitudes of proposed solutions and recommendations made by various authorities on the matter, in this essay, I will try to focus on one aspect of classroom management that I have found to be the most interesting in my short time as a teacher, and that is the use of rewards and sanctions to manage behaviour. As appropriate, I will reference the seminal Steer report (2009) and School A’s most recent Ofsted report (2012), and how its recommendations align with other literature and my experience as a classroom practitioner.

School A is a smaller than average “good” secondary school where “behaviour has improved since the last inspection and is now good,” according to the most recent Ofsted report (2012). Having only started teaching there two months ago, I can make no such comparative statement, but I am able to view behaviour in a light that experienced practitioners may not be able to. For this reason, I will make reflections on what I have seen and noticed that corroborates literary articles or otherwise.

## Sanctions

In a bygone era of teaching, corporal punishment in schools was seen as a way to build student character, respect for authority and ultimately control negative behaviour. But as Dubanoski (1983) argues, this only led to negative teaching and no evidence to support the commonly held ideas for the use of corporal punishment. Watson (1913) proposed that all aspects of human psychology can be explained by classical conditioning. In the classroom, this would mean that if a child experienced positive emotions in the classroom, they will view learning in a positive light. Similarly, if the child is

humiliated or punished by the teacher, they can develop an aversion not only of the teacher, but of the entire subject or even the school in general. Skinner (1938) built on this cognitive psychology work to propose operant conditioning, in which a negative reinforcement or a punishment could be applied to shape behaviour.

Although electrically shocking students would be highly immoral, the use of sanctions is still commonplace, including at School A, where there is a school-wide “Consequence” system: a C1 is a formal warning, issued with a one day tutor report (at their discretion); a C2 is a thirty minute centrally organised faculty detention and a three day report; finally a C3 is the removal of the child from the class and isolated along with a five day report. One thing to note is that although the definition of each sanction phase is clear, the intermediary steps between the sanctions is a grey area. Some teachers issue verbal warnings and other informal, multiple “second chances” prior to the recording of the formal Consequence. Others are stricter, and progress up the system more linearly and inflexibly. Steer mentions on page 23 how “the consistent application of rewards and sanctions are essential” (2009). I believe that the latter approach is more in line with this guidance, and hence find myself in that camp. To avoid being too rigid and unyielding, I find that one warning between each formal stage of the Consequence system seems to work well.

Pomeroy (1999) mentions the need of “phoning the students’ homes at the earliest sign of trouble” as a form of “preventative intervention.” Steer also recommends on page 82 to “take advantage of new technology such as emails and mobile phones to improve communications with parents.” In my time, I have made tens of phone calls to parents (in this essay, this refers to anyone at home who has responsibility of the child) and for the most part, they have tended to be of a negative nature. I have found that bringing the parents on board has led to a massive difference in classroom behaviour as the supportive parents tend to implement their own sanctions at home as well. This leads to a much quicker resolution to any behavioural issue. However, too many negative phone calls are an issue as well, as the student seems to get punished too often and develops resentment. Steer also says on page 76 that parents too got “tired of receiving letters and phone calls when things went wrong.” Negative phone calls as a sanction definitely have their place, but they should be used sparingly in my mind, to avoid being the regular messenger of bad news.

Although not sanctions in themselves, some teachers do see seating plans as such. Steer argues on page 76 that “where pupils are allowed to determine where they sit, their social interactions can inhibit teaching and create behaviour problems.” I set out a seating plan for each of my classes initially based on the register, and made them all alphabetical and boy-girl. This worked well for some classes and not so well for others. Since the first edition of the seating plans, all seating plans

have had to be revised to some degree. This was either due to new students being added to the class or issues with a pairing. Although I get multiple requests from students with their best “puppy-dog-eyes” to allow them to work with their friends for “just this lesson” I have maintained authority over the seating plan and stated that if there have been any changes, they have been made by myself. This is to remove any element of unfairness that students may observe in noticing changes to the seating plan.

On page 23, Steer criticises “a purely punitive approach” in calling it “immoral, damaging to society and doomed to failure.” I shall now spend some time reflecting on the use of rewards as a means to manage classroom behaviour and improve the overall environment for learning.

## Rewards

Skinner’s operant conditioning also mentions the use of positive reinforcements to boost what is deemed to be good behaviour. By rewarding acceptable actions, the teacher can gradually condition the students and teach them successful behaviour. But how often should teachers be praising? An article from the Harvard Business Review, focussing on sixty leadership teams in a corporate setting used research conducted by Losada (2004) concluding that the highest performing teams exhibited praise to sanction ratios of 5.6. Interestingly enough, this ratio was also found in Gottman’s (1993) analysis of what factors can lead to divorces in married couples; the couples complementing each other five times as many times as criticising them, stayed together more often than not. Therefore, it is not unsurprising that Robins (2012) also recommends teachers to “apply praise in a ratio of 5 praise comments to every 1 reprimand or sanction.” I must admit, I found it very difficult initially to actively look for students doing what I asked of them to praise, rather than the easier to do singling out of the students not doing as I instructed. Since I started teaching, I have now made a conscious decision to look for those doing appropriate activities that I deem acceptable and as such can praise them.

Another question is raised about praising though. What exactly should teachers be praising? As a teacher, my vision is to have a high expectation of all students and as such I find myself not praising the very little things, like underlining the title, for example. In a recent report by Coe (2014) for the Sutton Trust, he argues against “lavishly praising” and that the “wrong kinds of praise can be very harmful to learning.” Stipek (2010) also argues that “praise for successful performance on an easy task can be interpreted by a student as evidence that the teacher has a low perception of his or her ability. As a consequence, it can actually lower rather than enhance self-confidence.” I believe that this is a lot more damaging to the child’s education than a quick win assured by praising the small things.

Other than verbal praise, the school has subscribed to the Vivo rewards platform. This allows me to give up to 150 Vivo reward points per week as I see fit. The Vivo points can then be cashed in on their online store to purchase all sorts of items. Each month, School A will also have a particular focus, so far having included: uniform, homework and punctuality. I have found that these points tend to be more effective with the KS3 students. However, this does not mean to say that KS4 students do not like receiving these points. In addition to these reward points, I have created my own Science themed postcards to hand out in the lessons. I have found in my experience that handing out postcards in the lesson is a lot more effective in managing the classroom than discreetly sending them through the post. By limiting the number of postcards to a maximum of three per lesson, also gives it a more competitive feel as students wish to do their best to receive one. I am also in charge of the department's student of the week programme (entitled "Future Nobel Prize Winners") which is an even more exclusive reward where only one student is selected per teacher per week.

In the first two weeks of teaching, what I found myself doing was writing the names of the students who got sanctioned on the board. Thus, what I was inadvertently doing was giving recognition to the students who misbehaved. Since then, I have altered tack and now, I write down the names of those students who have either achieved Vivo points or postcards on the board. This gives recognition to those students who are deserving of it. Instead of writing the names of the misbehaving students on the board to highlight them, I now discreetly write their names in my notebook. This tactic has been so effective in the class, that even by lifting up my notebook and looking around the room, I can usually get classes to become quiet. Similarly, I can also achieve this (to a lesser degree) by approaching the rewards side of the board with my marker. This is the power of behaviour conditioning.

## Conclusion

An interesting comment from School A's Ofsted report was that "where teaching is less engaging, students occasionally lose their focus and become restless." Although this seems like a somewhat common-sense statement to make, it does reveal the inextricable link between planning, teaching and behaviour in the classroom. Haydn (2006) also states that for many experienced teachers, "getting as many pupils to want to learn as possible was an important part of managing pupil behaviour" and as such, a priority in their planning. Although, I cannot be in control of the actions of students, I can do my part as a new classroom practitioner to plan engaging lessons that are relevant to the students as well as the curriculum. By focussing my efforts on this and then utilising the powerful 5:1 praise to sanction ratio and other rewards systems, I can hope to create a classroom

environment where the students show the “successful behaviour” that will lead to successful students.

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