Should Positive Reinforcement be the Only Reinforcement in our Schools?

A Point and Counterpoint Project: Literature Review

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Abstract

Positive reinforcement is a significant part of many schools and individual classrooms throughout the country. Praising and rewarding students for displaying positive behaviors and completing tasks in the classroom helps teachers focus on the behaviors they expect, and gives less attention to the negative behaviors that may occur. Many say that positive reinforcement leads to a sense of responsibility in students, and helps them work harder to achieve tasks because they can look forward to receiving praise or a reward for their efforts. Others argue that positive reinforcement in the form of praise and rewards leads to decreased intrinsic motivation, a greater divide between the teacher and the students, and a decreased performance level. Opponents argue that excessive praise and rewarding positive behaviors leads only to temporary compliance, and does not foster a sense of responsibility and motivation for students in the long run. The debate surrounding positive reinforcement continues to cause controversy in education.
Should Positive Reinforcement be the Only Reinforcement in our Schools?

A Literature Review

Positive reinforcement strategies are used in many schools as a way to teach students to take responsibility for their own behaviors. Though positive reinforcement is a very popular behavior management system, many professionals question its effectiveness. There are professionals that state that positive reinforcement could in fact have an adverse effect on a student’s education. By giving students easy tasks and giving them positive reinforcement on those easy tasks, students are less likely to be willing to try harder tasks in which they may not receive the same reinforcement. Proponents believe that positive reinforcement leads to student responsibility and self-control, and helps students become positive contributors to the classroom environment. There is an ongoing debate about the effects of positive reinforcement and how it affects student achievement in the classroom.

Point: Positive Reinforcement is an Effective Behavior Management System

Positive reinforcement has been demonstrated to be an effective method that helps decrease destructive behaviors in the classroom, while increasing student compliance (Bouxsein, Roane, & Harper, 2011). A typical positive reinforcement system consists of teachers reinforcing positive behaviors displayed by students, while focusing minimal attention to inappropriate or negative behaviors (Babyak, Luze, & Kamps, 2000). Praise, or positive reinforcement, comes from the operant learning theory that focuses on consequences and their effects on future behaviors (Tauber, 1991). There are both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in the classroom. Students have the ability to use both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when students look for challenging tasks and assignments that provide a sense of
mastery. Extrinsic motivation is when students involve themselves in activities in order to receive rewards for their actions. The achievement goal theory says that student behavior is related to both achievement and motivation and it can be examined as a reason why students are engaged in certain academic work (Docan, 2006). When students know they will be rewarded in the end they are going to be more likely to complete the work. The positive reinforcement they receive gives them the extra boost they need to do their best work.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) procedures are present in many schools throughout the country. This is just one of the ways educators use positive reinforcement with students. PBIS procedures were initially developed for children with special needs, and focus on a preventative approach, rather than a reactive approach to behavior monitoring. Many schools are successful with the implementation of a school-wide PBIS procedure that is “rooted in basic and commonly understood behavioral, social learning, and organizational principles (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008). PBIS develops more socially appropriate behavior among students. Educators are teaching the behavioral expectations and rewarding appropriate behavior (Warren, Bohanon-Edmonson, Hank, Turnbull, Sailor, Wickham, Griggs, & Beech, 2006). Scott (2009) also mentions that in order for PBIS to be successful, there is a need for school-wide rules and clear expectations so that all students and faculty know what is expected.

Another form of positive reinforcement, known as token economy, has been the subject of educational controversy for many years. Token economy is the most researched behavior and performance intervention in schools (Klimas & McLaughlin, 2007). Token economy consists of rewarding students for good behavior or good work. When using a rewards system and token
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economy, student participation as well as learning increases. This form of positive reinforcement has the ability to aid the learning process in a great way (Nelson, K.G). When used properly token economy can be a positive influence in the classroom, and a good form of positive reinforcement.

Applications to Classroom Instruction

Positive reinforcement strategies are most successful when implemented and enforced school-wide, but can also be successful within the classroom if the expectations are clear and consistent. Schools can implement PBIS procedures that are followed by all professionals within the school. Students and adults must be trained and aware of all procedures that are implemented in order for this to be successful. If a schools does not have a PBIS system, individual teachers can use a rewards system in the classroom, where students are rewarded for outstanding behavior both individually and as a class. One way to do this is to have a classroom jar that students fill when they receive a ticket, or any other tangible object, for showing positive classroom behaviors. When the jar is full, the class can enjoy a reward such as an ice cream party or extra free time. This is a good way to help all students contribute in the classroom, and helps students understand that they must work hard by continually displaying outstanding behaviors in order to receive a reward.

Another way to implement positive reinforcement in the classroom is by giving verbal praise to students who are displaying desired behaviors and working hard to complete tasks. This works especially well with younger students because they are more eager to please the teacher and look for approval throughout the day. Simply complimenting a student or group of students on a job well done can go a long way, and can help other students display those
behaviors to seek the approval of the teacher. It is important to remember that positive reinforcement does not necessarily involve tangible rewards, it can be a more informal system such as verbal praise or an unexpected privilege. Sometimes the most successful forms of positive reinforcement are those that are a surprise to students. This encourages those students that normally do their best to continue to do so, and can also encourage others to try even harder because it is possible, but not definite, that they will see external rewards.

**Counterpoint: Positive Reinforcement is Ineffective and Negatively Affects Student Achievement**

Though positive reinforcement procedures are utilized in many schools throughout the country, some believe that they are not working as well as they should be, and that they in fact are having a negative effect on students. Many argue that excessive praise leads to a strained relationship between teachers and students. Others think that praise and rewards lead to a decreased intrinsic motivation in students, causing them to complete tasks and display appropriate behaviors only to receive praise or rewards, and not for their own benefit. Positive reinforcement may elicit temporary compliance and achievement, but may also lessen the performance and self-regulatory values that students need to be successful (Kohn, 1994).

Many researchers and educational professionals argue that positive reinforcement leads to a decreased intrinsic motivation to behave appropriately. According to Ormrod (2015), students are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically to perform and behave well in school. Many say that using positive reinforcement, rewarding positive behaviors, leads to an increased extrinsic motivation, where students become fixated on an external reward, and a lowered intrinsic motivation. Many studies have shown that people who are offered a reward for
completing a task or behavior do not perform as well as those who complete the task expecting no reward (Kohn, 1994). The students become dependent upon the approval of someone else, rather than the internal rewards they experience by completing a task.

Praise can also be said to be a dangerous thing in a classroom, especially when used incorrectly. When teachers give students positive reinforcements on easy tasks it can hurt a student's progress. Students begin to feel as though they are not capable of harder work, or they may be less inclined to try harder work because they do not want to lose the positive reinforcement. Students will begin to settle, and lose the intrinsic motivation to challenge themselves. Teachers can work around this by reinforcing positive effort in the classroom. By telling a student they are working hard, or they are putting in good effort it will challenge the student to continue this work. When reinforcing a student's progress by simply giving a good grade this effect is lost as well as the intrinsic motivation (Dweck, 1999). By simply complimenting their effort, the students must work harder to obtain the final reward, or token economy. Students get used to the extrinsic motivation or token economy, and when it is removed student performance returns to normal (Novack, 2001).

Some find that praise lessens the status of the student and increases the status of the teacher, which can cause a disconnect in the student-teacher relationship. When a student is praised, he or she is reminded to conform to the expectations of the teacher (Tauber, 1991). This can cause a disconnect between the student and the teacher, and may cause students to become numb to praise, and possibly acquire a negative reaction to it. Students may begin to feel that when they do not receive praise for a particular task or behavior, the value of that action is
diminished. They become dependent upon that praise, and feel that a task or positive behavior is unworthy of being completed if it will not be noticed and praised by the teacher.

**Applications to Classroom Instruction**

There are many tips and strategies that can be used to help with classroom management that are not based solely on positive reinforcement. Many say the most successful classrooms are those that have formed a balance between positive reinforcement for good behaviors and consequences for negative behaviors. Ormrod (2015) discusses that ignoring some less intrusive behaviors can be beneficial for teachers, and will help decrease interruptions to instructional time. Many educational professionals focus on setting clear expectations from the first day of school, starting the school year off expecting students to follow the rules, and forming a balance between rewards and consequences. According to Kohn, “Children are likely to become enthusiastic, lifelong learners as a result of being provided with an engaging curriculum; a safe, caring community in which to discover and create; and a significant degree of choice about what (and how and why) they are learning” (1994, p. 4).

**Conclusion**

Positive reinforcement is a controversial behavior support strategy because, like all topics in education, it has benefits as well as flaws. Overall, using positive reinforcement techniques can lead to a secure, positive learning environment where students feel that they are valued. It allows negative behaviors to receive less attention, which often leads to the disappearance of those behaviors. It also allows students to develop a sense of self-control and responsibility for their actions.
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There is research that supports the use of positive reinforcement, and research that explains why it is not an effective practice in classrooms. Evidence suggests that the use of positive reinforcement, in the forms of token economy and PBIS, is helpful to students and improves their performance in school. However, there is also research that argues that positive reinforcement is not the best system for students. Students need consistency, so finding the correct ways to implement positive reinforcement will be the main source of success. Students should be challenged and know what is expected of them, but should also have clear expectations that they can follow each day in order to be successful. As teachers, we must be able to balance the use of positive reinforcement in our classrooms with other proven strategies. This will help ensure that all students succeed, and that undesired behaviors are a rarity.
References


