THE PERSISTENCE OF REWARD AND PUNISHMENT IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Classroom management helps teachers establish and maintain an appropriate environment for the achievement of teaching and learning goals. To create this environment, it is crucial that they be able to effectively prevent or minimize classroom misbehaviors. Many teachers still use traditional rewards and punishments rooted in behaviorism and teacher-centeredness to manage children's behavior, despite the availability of more developmentally appropriate techniques and strategies. Therefore, this study aims to determine preschool teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices related to the use of reward and punishment in the classroom. Data were collected from 30 preschool teachers using a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers, and analyzed via the word-lists technique. The main themes determined were (1) the necessity of reward/punishment, (2) the frequency of reward/punishment use and (3) specific types of reward/punishment.

Keywords: Classroom management, rewards, punishment, preschool teachers, preschool classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom management helps teachers establish and maintain an appropriate environment for the achievement of teaching and learning goals (Weinstein & Novodvorsky, 2011). Behavior management is one of the dimensions of classroom management and involves teachers' efforts to respond to undesired classroom behaviors as well as pre-planned strategies for the prevention of such behaviors (Martin & Sass, 2010). Teachers' strategies and expectations are influenced by their personalities and philosophies (Charles, 1996). For instance, those whose approach is teacher-centered are strict about how much freedom children should have in regard to their own learning and self-control, and how much control teachers should exert over the learning environment and children's behaviors (Tzuo, 2007). Teachers who follow this approach believe that the consequences of children's behaviors are important because they influence the frequency with which children will repeat the behavior (Yıldırım, Yerin Güneri & Hatipoğlu Sümer, 2002). Therefore, these teachers reward and punish children for their behaviors (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009).

Behaviorism, meanwhile, holds that rewards increase the likelihood of desired behaviors, and punishment decreases the repetition of undesired behaviors (Albaiz & Ernest, 2015). Although many characteristics of the latest national preschool curriculum in Turkey are congruent with a child-centered approach (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2013), there are still many Turkish teachers who use rewards and punishment to control children's behaviors (Akar, Tantekin-Erden, Tor & Şahin, 2010; Kök, Küçükoğlu, Tuğluk & Koçyiğit, 2007). Several problems can arise from the use of rewards and punishment. For instance, rewards have been found to

negatively influence children's intrinsic motivation, while punishment may lead to anger, loss of effectiveness of teacher, destruction of relationships with children, and self-centeredness (as cited in Albaiz & Ernest, 2015). Traditional rewards and punishments rooted in behaviorism and teacher-centeredness have been the focus of a great deal of previous research. Some of these studies' topics have included child physical punishment and international human rights (Watkinson & Rock, 2016); children's perceptions of physical punishment in Ghana (Imoh, 2013); learning experiences arising from peer conflicts between two- and three-year old children in Holland (Singer, van Hoogdalem, De Haan & Bekkema, 2012); parents' opinions about child corporal punishment in Canada (Bell & Romano, 2012); Tanzanian parents' and grandparents' conceptions of early childhood discipline strategies (Frankenberg, Holmqvist & Rubenson, 2010); the relationship between US pre-service teachers' childhood experiences and their perceived teaching styles (Cohen & Amidon, 2004); children's perceptions of unfair reward and punishment in New Zealand (Evans, Galyer & Smith, 2001); and physical punishment based on ethnicity, income and parenting context in the US (Wissow, 2001). In Turkey, some researchers have aimed to determine what reward and punishment methods are used by teachers in their classrooms (Yılmaz, 2007) and how often these methods are used in support of classroom discipline (Yılmaz & Babaoğlan, 2013). Others have studied disciplinary strategies for children at home and at school from the perspective of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kent-Kükürtcü, 2011); examined the classroom-management behaviors of K-8 teachers (Akar, Tantekin Erden, Tor & Şahin, 2010); investigated the prevalence and frequency of discipline-related psychological aggression behaviors during teachers' internal family conflicts (Bilgin & Kartal, 2009a); and measured the frequency of non-violent parental discipline techniques (Bilgin & Kartal, 2009b). However, there has hitherto been very little research involving what preschool teachers think about the use of reward and punishment, and why. Therefore, the current study aims to determine preschool teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices related to the use of reward and punishment in the classroom.

METHOD

Research Design
This study consisted of basic qualitative research conducted through semi-structured interviews to determine preschool teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices related to the use of reward and punishment in the classroom. Merriam (2009) defined basic qualitative research as seeking an understanding of what a phenomenon means to those participating in it, using in-depth interviews, observations and document reviews.

Participants
The participants in this study were 30 preschool teachers (20 female, 10 male) working in public schools in Van, Turkey, and were selected purposefully. All were university graduates in early childhood education, and at the time the study was conducted were teaching classrooms of between 12 and 27 pupils. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 35, and their teaching experience from one to 13 years.

Data Collection Instrument
A semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers was used for data collection. While developing the protocol, the researchers initially reviewed the relevant literature (Barrett & Toma, 2013; Clavien, Mersch & Chapuisat, 2016; Cohen & Amidon, 2004; Evans, Galyer & Smith, 2001; Kale, 1995; Kent-Kükürtcü, 2011; Prochner & Hwang, 2008; Yılmaz & Babaoğlan, 2013) and prepared a first draft consisting of 18 questions. The views of three experts from the fields of qualitative research, educational sciences and early childhood education were asked their opinions of the first draft. It was decided that if all three of the experts felt that a particular question was not directly relevant to the aim of the study, that question would be eliminated. The original draft's question about the difference between reward and reinforcement was deleted from the protocol for this reason. The final interview protocol approved by the three experts consisted of five demographic questions and 12 questions related to teachers' beliefs and practices, and was piloted with three preschool teachers who were not included among the study participants.

Data Collection Procedure
At the outset of the study, preschool teachers were contacted through school administrators or secretaries and aim of the study was explained to them. Those who volunteered to participate signed a consent form. Teachers

were interviewed one by one in places within their schools that they expressed a preference for. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, and all lasted between 25 and 35 minutes.

Data Analysis

For purposes of data analysis, all audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. Then, two of the researchers separately coded them using Bernard and Ryan's (2010) word-lists technique for qualitative analysis. This technique calls for the two coders (working separately) to attempt to list, and then to count the frequency of, the unique words in the interviews. Then, they discuss their codes with each other and refer to prior literature in an attempt to reach agreement about which codes should be retained. In this case, the two coders reached agreement on all codes. Following analysis of the data, three main themes were determined:
(1) The necessity of reward/punishment,
(2) The frequency of reward/punishment use, and
(3) Specific types of reward/punishment.

FINDINGS

Beliefs and Practices Related to Rewards
(1) Necessity of rewards
The respondent preschool teachers were first asked if they used rewards in their classrooms, and all of them said "yes". All teachers also stated that the use of rewards in preschool classrooms was necessary. One of them said:
"Rewards used at the correct time and focusing on a specific behavior absolutely changes the behaviors of the children." K_8
The teachers maintained that the use of rewards in preschool classrooms was necessary because it strengthens desired behaviors (n=26), motivates (n=14) and encourages (n=7) children to engage in desired behavior, supports children's self-confidence (n=5), helps children build perception related to discipline (n=5), directs children to desired behavior (n=4), and helps teachers recognize the good behaviors of children (n=3). With regard to the strengthening of desired behaviors, one of the teachers (K_{22}) stated that she could support strengthening desired behaviors and manage the classroom effectively. She then added that children might feel better in such an environment and be more actively engaged in classroom activities. Another teacher said:
"I think reward is necessary because desired behaviors can be strengthened through helping children discriminate between desired and undesired behaviors. Young children can comprehend this difference through only reward." K_{23}
In terms of motivating children to engage in desired behaviors, one of the teachers (K_{27}) stated that rewards heartened children and helped them maintain desired behavior, and that a reward system could therefore be thought of as a good motivator. Another teacher (K_2) emphasized the frequency of reward use, and told us that if such frequency was changed, it would motivate children to maintain the desired behavior. A third commented:
"I think that young children should be motivated to learn and to maintain desired behaviors. Reward may be a good motivator when the form, time and frequency of it are used in an appropriate way." K_{15}
Another point emphasized by the preschool teachers in the sample was that rewards were necessary because they encouraged children to engage in desired behaviors. According to one participant (K_{20}), some children maintain desired behaviors, and other children adopt such behaviors, because a reward system exists; and that therefore, such systems tend to increase the overall number of children who learn desired behaviors.
With regard to supporting children's self-confidence, the teachers usually focused on the sense of success. For instance, one (K_{28}) stated that when a child received a reward from an adult whom she loved, she would feel successful. Such a sense of success results in self-confidence, which in turn directs the child to maintain desired behavior. Additional comments included:
"I believe that rewards should absolutely be used to improve children's self-confidence and personal characteristics." K_{27}
"I believe that rewards support children's self-confidence so they start to take responsibility and solve their problems themselves." K_{15}
In terms of perceptions related to discipline, the sample emphasized learning rules through rewards. For instance, one of the teachers (K_6) stated that children developed a perception of discipline through recognizing

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the distinction between desired and undesired behaviors, and started to learn and follow the rules. As some others put it:

"While I was an undergraduate, I used to believe that use of reward was not necessary for young children. I am a preschool teacher now and I believe that it is necessary and an effective strategy for teaching rules and discipline. For instance, my classroom is too crowded and I can't focus on individual children and tell them the rules one by one. Therefore, rewards are important." K$_{22}$

"I believe that rewards may help children gain a perception of discipline, because a child who gets rewards avoids undesired behaviors and is disposed to obey the rules." K$_{16}$

Also, some teachers believed that rewards redirected children's undesired behaviors into desired ones. One of them (K$_{30}$) stated that the motivation provided by rewards – except from exaggerated rewards – pointed children in the direction of desired behaviors. Lastly, three preschool teachers told that the use of rewards might afford teachers opportunities to see children's good behaviors that they might otherwise not see.

(2) Frequency of reward

In contrast to the unanimity among the sample regarding the necessity of rewards, they reported a variety of practices regarding their frequency. While some of the teachers (n=11) used rewards at regular intervals such as once or twice a week, some (n=8) used them as often as necessary until children learnt a particular behavior or rule(s). One teacher (K$_{10}$) emphasized that rewards given regularly became a habit for children. Another said:

"Every Friday I reward children who mostly perform desired behaviors, since daily activities are finished and we will have a two-day break." K$_{14}$

Some teachers who stated that they used rewards until children learned behaviors or rules commented as follows:

"I give rewards until children learn the behavior, but I decrease their frequency. For instance, at the beginning, I gave a reward every day of the week. I observed them and if they kept performing the desired behavior, I gave it twice a week. Then, maybe once a month… When children learn the behavior, I stop rewarding them because I don't want them to get used to bribery." K$_{29}$

"Frankly, I used it very often at the beginning of the year because children had to learn the classroom rules. However, I've started to lessen the frequency of rewarding now, toward end of the semester." K$_{22}$

"Until children learn desired behaviors and start to perform them, I stick some stickers to their reward board when I observe the behavior. Also, I give a gift at the end of each semester." K$_{16}$

Some teachers (n=8) also stated that they gave rewards to children when they repeated desired behaviors. One said:

"I praise children when I observe desired behaviors. They collect stars for good behaviors and when they have ten stars I give them a concrete reward." K$_9$

Lastly, some of the teachers (n=3) said that they used rewards only in certain specific activities or cases, so as to prevent children from getting used to rewards, which might then lose their value.

(3) Types of rewards

Three-quarters of the teachers (n=23) reported that they used concrete rewards such as pencils, chocolate, candies, stickers, toys, and weekly or monthly gifts of various kinds. One of them said:

"I usually give concrete rewards because children like them more. I give stickers or balloons only to children who perform desired behaviors, but I give some rewards such as candy or chocolate to all children." K$_1$

Nearly half the teachers (n=13) also praised children for their desired behaviors, while some (n=4) stated that their rewards varied according to specific children's preferences. One of the latter group commented:

"My rewards completely depend on the children. For instance, smiling, touching or stroking their hair are effective for some children, while others expect only verbal approval. Also, I give some children some responsibilities – as rewards – such as assisting me or distributing papers to their friends." K$_{27}$

Four teachers stated that they used reward-boards, which one of them explained as follows:

"I made a reward-board. There are photos of children on the board. If they perform desired behaviors, I put a sticker on their photo. When I observe an undesired behavior, I remove the sticker." K$_{22}$

Beliefs and Practices Related to Punishment
(1) Necessity of punishment

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When asked if they used punishment in their classrooms, 80% of them (n=24) answered that they did. One (K_{30}) emphasized that she tried not to use punishment, and ignored undesired behavior at first. Another said:
"I use punishment but I have to emphasize that I use it in a balance with reward. For, I believe that only this balance allows me to control the children and help them perform desired behavior." K_{27}
Two others commented:
> *"I use punishment but I don't stress the word 'punishment'."* K_{19}
> *"I use a timeout chair instead of punishment."* K_7

Of the six participant teachers who said they did not use punishment in their classrooms, one (K_{24}) explained that she did not believe punishment influenced children's behaviors in the long term. Another commented:
"I don't use punishment because I want children to talk about their undesired behaviors and to be able to apologize – if needed. Also, I prefer focusing on desired behaviors and supporting children's self-confidence." K_{16}
Nearly two-thirds of the participants (n=19) responded in the affirmative to the question about whether punishment is necessary, and they emphasized some reasons for this: that it eliminates undesired behaviors (n=15); helps children to discriminate between desired behaviors and undesired ones (n=12) and think about their behavior (n=7); maintains consistency in the classroom (n=3); and helps children perform desired behaviors (n=3).
One teacher (K_{17}) said that punishment was a necessary and effective means of removing undesired behavior, but accepted that this behavior might later reappear. Another commented:
"I think that punishment helps children understand the results of their undesired behavior. Therefore, children started to avoid performing this behavior." K_{23}
One teacher (K_9) emphasized the importance of children's awareness of the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. She also added that punishment was effective in helping children understand that there were certain rules in the classroom and that they therefore could not just do whatever they wanted.
Some teachers believed that children should reflect upon their behavior, and that punishment could help them do this. One of these teachers (K_{26}) favored the use of timeouts and other punishments based on the child not being allowed to participate in certain activities. According to her, this allowed the children who were being punished time to think about why had been punished, and that this made them less likely to repeat the undesired behavior. In a similar vein, another teacher said:
"I think a child who is punished has an opportunity to think about his behavior, to regret it, and accept that he shouldn't behave in this way again. However, it shouldn't be ignored that the teacher should talk with him about the undesired behavior and the reasons for the punishment." K_5
One participant (K_{27}) emphasized the positive impact of punishment on children's social skills, and stated that she used punishment to support children's social skills as well as to maintain consistency in the classroom. Another commented:
"I usually use punishment to prevent an undesired behavior from having negative effects on other children and on the consistency of the classroom." K_{14}
As related to helping children perform desired behavior, one preschool teacher (K_{28}) believed that punishment absolutely helped children avoid undesired behavior and be directed to desired behavior. Also, while another teacher (K_{30}) stressed importance of frequency and types of punishment to encourage desired behavior, another one said:
"A child who was deprived of his favorite activities or material obeys the rules and performs desired behavior not to experience it again." K_{27}

(2) Frequency of punishment
The teachers in the sample reported a wide range of practices when it came to the frequency with which punishment was used. While some (n=8) used punishment rarely, as many others (n=8) reported using it whenever children repeated undesired behavior. One of the group who punished children rarely (K_{28}) said that she preferred to ignore undesired behavior, but sometimes this became impossible. In terms of punishment being linked to the repetition of undesired behavior, one of the teachers said:
"I warn children first when I see an undesired behavior. However, if they persist in the behavior; I have to punish them." K_{11}
Lastly, six teachers stated that they punished children when classroom management or classroom order was influenced negatively. One of them (K_{15}) explicitly linked this to the fact that the classroom rules had been established collectively by the teacher and the children. Another teacher said:

"Think about a child who harms her friend. In this case, both children are influenced negatively. Also, other children can't focus on their activities, and I lose my classroom management and order. I punish the child so that other children will see the results of undesired behavior." K[20]

(3) Types of punishment

The types of punishment emphasized by the respondents were of two broad types: (1) timeouts/timeout chairs (n=17) and (2) deprivation of their favorite activities/items (n=15). With regard to the former, one teacher (K[29]) stated that she gave children timeouts not to punish them but to help them to recognize undesired behavior. Another two said:

"I send children out of the classroom for timeouts and ask them to think about their undesired behaviors. Four or five minutes later, I bring them back into the classroom and ask them to apologize to me and their friends." K[3]

"I would call it 'thinking time' rather than 'timeout', because I ask them to think about what they did, why they did it, and how the rest of us were affected by it." K[20]

With regard to the second type of punishment, one teacher said:

"I usually deprive children of their favorite activities. For instance, they like outdoor activities very much. Therefore, when a child misbehaves, I don't let him go out and he stays in the classroom." K[14]

DISCUSSION

In this study, all the teachers stated that they used rewards in their preschool classrooms, and most of them also emphasized that they used punishment. Given that the participants' teaching experience ranged from one to 13 years and their ages from 23 to 35, it might reasonably be expected that they would be more constructivist than behaviorist, due to both the child-centered preschool curriculum currently in use in Turkey, and the constructivist, child-centered, broadly anti-reward and punishment approach to the training of preschool teachers there. As such, it is possible to say that there is an inconsistency between theory and practice in Turkish preschool teachers' education process.

Although the preschool teachers in our study gave different reasons for thinking this, they mostly thought rewards were necessary to increase the frequency of positive behaviors, and punishment necessary to decrease the incidence of undesirable ones. As many of the teachers' responses correctly indicated, the punishing and rewarding of children has a long tradition in education (McFadden, Marsh, Price & Hwang, 1992; Prochner & Hwang, 2008; Wächter, Lungu, Liu, Willingham & Ashe, 2009). However, it can be hazardous for teachers to focus on the short-term effects of rewards and punishment in their classrooms, without giving due consideration to their long-term effects on children's development and behavior (Marshall, 2005).

Most of the teachers reported that they used concrete rewards such as pencils, chocolate, candies, stickers, toys, and weekly or monthly gifts of various kinds. This may indicate that these teachers thought verbal approval was not as meaningful or attractive to preschool children as concrete rewards were. Several prior studies (Acchpal, 2000; Einarsdottir, 2010; Özen, 2008; Sevinç, 2006; Şahin, Sak & Şahin, 2013) have emphasized that the main role of preschool education to develop the social skills of young children, and yet the preschool teachers in our sample mostly isolated children socially through time-outs. This may reflect that preschool teachers are less aware of this key expectation about preschool education than one might expect them to be, and/or that they lack awareness of the critical importance of this period for the social development of young children.

Our consideration of the use of rewards and punishment among Turkish preschool teachers suggests that these strategies are not developmentally appropriate. As reported in previous literature, rewards can be barriers to children's intrinsic motivation (as cited in Albaiz & Ernest, 2015), while time-out punishments are a form of social isolation (Prochner & Hwang, 2008). Developmentally appropriate discipline should be based on the relationships between children and teachers, and the MoNE should provide more in-service education opportunities focused on informing teachers about child development and developmentally appropriate discipline strategies.

Further research could usefully examine whether there is a relationship between the use of rewards and punishment, on the one hand, and on the other, class sizes, teachers' levels of teaching experience and/or teachers' level of education (high school, vocational school, or undergraduate).

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