THE EFFICACY OF AN ALL-POSITIVE APPROACH TO CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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This study addressed the question of whether an all-positive approach to classroom management can be effective. The on-task behavior and academic performance of eight, second- and third-grade children with behavior problems were examined. Results indicated that an all-positive approach that relied primarily on praise was not effective. However, when an individualized reward system was used, the children's rates of on-task behavior were high and stable. Similar effects were observed for academic productivity. Thus, a classroom can be managed using only positive consequences. However, to be successful, such an approach may require a considerable amount of teacher time and effort, particularly potent, varied and individual rewards, and high rates of appropriate behavior previously established using both positive and negative consequences.

DESCRIPTORS: academic performance, on-task behavior, classroom management, all-positive approach, elementary school children

Spurred by Skinner's message of the 1950s, the behavioral Zeitgeist championed the view that a positively managed environment was possible, superior, and a goal to be aimed for. The corollary was that punishment did not work. Accumulated data, however, attest to the continued frequent use of negative feedback in classroom environments (Strain, Lambert, Kerr, Stagg, & Lenker, 1983; White, 1975), to the efficacy of negative consequences for managing problematic behavior (e.g., Azrin & Powers, 1975; Drabman & Spitalnik, 1973; Iwata & Bailey, 1974; Rapport, Murphy, & Bailey, 1982; Van Houten, Nau, MacKenzie-Keating, Sameoto, & Colavecchia, 1982), and to the failure of attempts to conduct classes using only positive consequences (e.g., Becker, Madsen, Arnold, & Thomas, 1967; Hall et al., 1971; Rosén, O'Leary, Joyce, Conway, & Pfiffner, 1984; Sajwaj, Twardosz, & Burke, 1972). In the most recent attempt, Rosén et al. (1984) demonstrated repeatedly that when special education teachers stopped providing negative feedback to students

who had been functioning successfully with a combination of positive and negative consequences, the students' academic and social behavior deteriorated, often markedly.

Although the Rosén et al. (1984) study was not designed to assess the effects of a theoretically optimal arrangement of positive consequences (they used verbal praise along with occasional special privileges such as bonus work, story time, or a positive note home), their results question the efficacy of an all-positive approach to classroom management. However, it seems unwarranted to conclude that a positively managed classroom is not possible unless the finding holds when a potentially more powerful incentive system is used. Our study was conducted to address the issue of whether an all-positive classroom environment can succeed by comparing the effects of enhanced positive consequences to the effects of typical positive consequences with and without the addition of negative consequences.

METHOD

Participants

The five boys and three girls attending the Point of Woods Laboratory School, a special education facility for children with behavior problems, participated. The five second graders and three third

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graders had been referred by their regular class teachers because of inattention and conduct problems. All children were from middle-class suburban families and were of at least average intelligence. The class was taught by a male special education teacher. The study began after the children had been attending the class for 5 months and were functioning successfully.

Measures

The children's and teacher's behavior was observed from behind a one-way mirror between 10:00 and 11:00 each morning. Children worked independently during this time; the teacher provided periodic academic instruction to individuals. Behavior was recorded in 10-second intervals. The interval was scored as on task if the child spent the entire interval engaged in appropriate, task-related behaviors. If not, the interval was scored as off task. Three teacher behaviors were observed. Positive consequences included physical and verbal behaviors demonstrating approval of the child's work or behavior. Negative consequences included any physical or verbal behaviors demonstrating disapproval. Neutral teacher interactions consisted of instructional comments without an evaluative content or tone.

Observations of the eight children were rotated among four trained undergraduate observers with two observers present each day. A fifth observer recorded teacher behaviors. All observers were blind to the experimental hypotheses. Reliability data were collected for 35% of the child observations and 37% of the teacher observations. Reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements regarding the occurrence of each behavior by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. Over the course of the study, inter-observer agreement was as follows: on task ($M = 97\%$, range 78%–100%), positive consequences ($M = 89\%$, range 71%–100%), negative consequences ($M = 86\%$, range 57%–100%), and neutral interactions ($M = 88\%$, range 80%–99.5%).

Academic product measures were also collected

beginning on the 13th day of the study. These measures consisted of reading worksheets tailored to individual academic levels, which the children were given to work on during the first 10 minutes of each observation period. Quantity and accuracy of problems completed were computed.

Procedure

Although data were gathered for only 1 hr, the teacher maintained the following experimental conditions throughout the entire school day. To determine the teacher's typical rates of positive and negative consequences, an initial assessment (A) of classroom functioning was conducted. Subsequently, a design incorporating two separate reversals was implemented. First, enhanced positive consequences (C) were compared to regular positive consequences (B), both in the absence of negative consequences to determine whether a more powerful incentive system could improve behavior in the absence of negative feedback. Second, enhanced positive consequences were compared to the teacher's typical combination of positive and negative consequences to determine whether the gains achieved with the more powerful incentive program would be sufficient to permit considering an all-positive environment a viable alternative to one incorporating negative consequences.

Regular positives and negatives (A). During the first 5 days of the study, the teacher was instructed to use his usual (Regular) positive and negative consequences. These included verbal praise, bonus work, posting work, verbal reprimands, time-out, and withdrawal of privileges (i.e., removal of work, loss of recess time, incomplete work completed during recess). All consequences were contingent on behavior or academic work or both.

Regular positives alone (B). During this 4-day condition, all negative consequences were withdrawn and the teacher was instructed to ignore all inappropriate behavior. In addition, he was instructed to use the same rates of regular positive feedback per child as he had during the previous condition.

Enhanced positives alone (C). While continu-

Table 1

Condition Means for the Number of Teacher Positive (+) and Negative (−) Comments per Child per Hour and Class Means for Percent on Task and Number and Accuracy of Reading Problems Completed

Student	Reg. pos. & neg.		Reg. pos. alone		Enhanced pos. alone		Reg. pos. alone		Reg. pos. & neg.		Enhanced pos. alone		Reg. pos. & neg.	
	+	−	+	−	+	−	+	−	+	−	+	−	+	−
1	2.1	0.8	2.1	0.0	3.5	0.0	2.1	0.0	1.8	0.6	6.2	0.0	2.4	0.5
2	7.6	2.7	7.5	0.0	7.7	0.0	7.3	0.0	6.5	1.6	12.0	0.0	6.3	1.8
3	1.9	1.4	2.3	0.0	4.4	0.0	2.3	0.0	1.8	1.0	6.2	0.0	2.1	1.3
4	4.3	1.6	3.8	0.0	4.3	0.0	3.5	0.0	2.6	0.8	7.3	0.0	3.1	1.0
5	2.2	1.1	2.0	0.0	4.3	0.0	1.9	0.0	1.6	0.5	7.0	0.0	1.9	0.6
6	3.5	1.4	2.7	0.0	2.8	0.0	3.0	0.0	2.4	1.1	6.0	0.0	2.1	0.8
7	2.9	0.0	3.5	0.0	4.2	0.0	3.5	0.0	2.9	0.0	7.6	0.0	3.2	0.4
8	4.1	0.3	3.2	0.0	5.6	0.0	3.0	0.0	3.4	0.5	8.3	0.0	3.4	0.5
Class totals	28.6	9.3	27.1	0.0	36.8	0.0	26.6	0.0	23.0	6.1	60.6	0.0	24.5	6.9
Class means:														
% On task	93		67		80		54		92		86		93	
# Problems completed	—		—		46		38		43		56		79	
% Accuracy	—		—		83		85		84		80		85	

ing to withhold all negative consequences, the teacher was instructed to increase the frequency of positive consequences and to add new rewards in order to maximize the amount of time the children engaged in on-task activities in the absence of negative consequences. The new rewards consisted of songtime, special recess activities, posting work on a “superstar” board, being allowed to read comic books, playing musical instruments, writing stories, and drawing. All positive consequences were selected by the teacher, varied daily, and were contingent on both appropriate behavior and complete, accurate academic work. This condition lasted 10 days.

Regular positives alone (B). For the next 4 days, the teacher was instructed to maintain the same frequency of regular positive consequences he had used per child during the first two conditions and to continue withholding all negative consequences.

Regular positives and negatives (A). During this 4-day condition, the teacher was again instructed to use a combination of regular positive and negative consequences with rates maintained at those observed during the first condition.

Enhanced positives alone (C). The positive

consequences provided during the first 10 days of this condition varied daily and were the same as those provided during the previous enhanced positives alone condition. The teacher was also instructed to increase the frequency of positive consequences beyond that observed during the first enhanced positives alone condition. Despite the use of the enhanced positive consequences, on-task behavior was quite variable. As a result, a daily reward menu was added to the other enhanced positive consequences for the last 5 days of this condition. Deserving students selected one reward from a daily menu (e.g., positive note home, board games, helping the teacher with chores, special lunch privileges).

Regular positives and negatives (A). During the final 4 days of the study, the regular positive and negative consequences delivered were maintained at levels equivalent to those of the previous regular positive and negative conditions.

Throughout the course of the study, the teacher was instructed to maintain his rates of neutral interaction time per child at the level observed in the first condition. He received daily feedback regarding his rates of positive and negative consequences and neutral interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1. Individual students' on-task percentages each day across all conditions. On Days 38-42, a daily reward

The independent variables were effectively implemented (Table 1). No negative consequences were observed during the regular and enhanced positives alone conditions. The frequency of positive consequences was increased during the enhanced positives alone conditions. The teacher provided equivalent amounts of neutral interaction to the children across conditions, averaging 6 minutes of interaction (range = 5.5-7.4) per child per hour across conditions.

With respect to on-task behavior (Figure 1; Table 1), the results were clear and consistent across the children. Regular positive consequences were not effective alone in maintaining the children's on-task behavior. In the absence of negative feedback, enhanced positive consequences were more effective than regular positive consequences for six of the eight children (Students 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7). Also, the children's functioning during the enhanced positives alone condition was nearly as good as their functioning during the regular positives and negatives condition. This was particularly true when the reward menu was in effect.

Academic productivity also deteriorated when only regular positive consequences were used, but improved across the remainder of the study. Mean accuracy rates tended to remain fairly stable across the conditions. Five of the eight children followed the general pattern of the group. No systematic differences were observed in the remaining three children.

Thus, the implication of the Rosén *et al.* (1984) results, that behavior problem children cannot be successfully managed in an all-positive environment, apparently is valid when praise is the primary form of positive feedback, but does not hold when a powerful and individualized incentive system is used.

However, the practicality of teachers using an all-positive approach may depend on the ability of the teacher to maintain high rates of praise and on

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menu was added to the other enhanced positive consequences.

the specific procedures used (e.g., children's selection of their own rewards). The success of an all-positive approach may also be limited to situations in which the teacher has already shaped high levels of on-task behavior using a combination of positive and negative consequences. The teacher observed in this study had been using such a combination for 5 months prior to the initiation of this study. Had the study been conducted at the beginning of the year when the children had not learned the classroom rules and exhibited low frequencies of appropriate behaviors, the enhanced positive approach alone may have been inadequate.

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