

# Using Structured Positive and Negative Reinforcement to Change Student Behavior in Educational Settings in Order to Achieve Student Academic Success

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## Abstract

Typically, classroom management approaches for dealing with disruptions and misbehavior from students involve the use of various forms of punishment: removal from the classroom, fines, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, or expulsions (Garret, 2015). However, traditional classroom management methods have yielded very little positive results. Some would even argue that classroom behaviors are escalating out of control. Using research based approaches; this article's goal is to help teachers discover student-centered approaches that will positively improve discipline inside the classroom.

## Keywords

Reinforcement, Behavior, Punishment, Special Education

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, approaches for dealing with student disturbances and disobedience are based on various forms of punishment: removal from the classroom, fines, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, or expulsions (Garret, 2015). For the most part, schools continue to base their discipline policies on a strict adherence to obedience (Goodman, 2006) and zero-tolerance policies (Maag, 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). These practices are stated in most every code of conduct handbook in public schools throughout the United States. Some of these approaches may give educators the false sense that schools and classrooms have become safer when disruptive students are removed. Surprisingly, research shows that punishment and severe reprimands have minimal effect on helping students perform more socially acceptable behaviors because removal from the classroom does not come with appropriate behavior instruction – just ejection (Carter & Pool, 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). In recent years, policy makers at the local, state, and federal level have expressed concerns about the effectiveness of zero-tolerance disciplinary approaches, encouraging schools to adopt more constructive approaches that would create more healthy learning environments (Skiba, 2014).

Despite the evidence to the contrary, educators and schools continue to find zero-tolerance policies and punishments as acceptable approaches to deter misbehavior. For the most part, according to Skiba (2014), schools and districts do not get a chance to consider best practices and alternatives to their zero-tolerance policy. Teachers and administrators working in schools with a high implementation of zero-tolerance policies see themselves navigating high-stress environments where alternatives to harsh disciplinary practices are rarely available and discussed (Hernandes-Melis, Fenning, & Lawrence, 2016; Robinett, 2012). In addition, the successful support to these disciplinary alternatives might not exist, as it does require a major investment in resources and training by the districts and schools (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

In this article, we discuss positive-research based practices that help educators efficiently change disruptive student behaviors in educational settings in order to achieve student academic success for all their students. We begin by examining the historical implementation of zero-tolerance policy in the United States. We continue by discussing the foundational understanding of positive and negative classroom reinforces. Finally, we discuss the implementation of alternatives that have successfully worked in the classroom, which have created healthier learning environment.

## 2. The “Get-Tough” Legacy

Historically in the United States, schools have been expected to be learning environments where students acquire the virtues of becoming productive citizens (Pohl, 2013; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004); however, the implementation of harsh discipline techniques have not only been accepted, but it has become an integral part of schools, achieving a primordial place in the curricular agenda (Parsons, 2015). In the United States, zero-tolerance policies and rigid school environments became popular as the industrialization of the country demanded a labor-ready workforce available for the factories (Pohl, 2013). The demand for workers promoted a factory-like environment in the schools, encouraging educational settings with rigid schedules, standardized curriculums, and regimented physical lay-outs (Goodman, 2006; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004). In the early second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, zero-tolerance policies became popular in schools and criminal justice systems (Skiba & Losen, 2016) as the public demanded schools to be training places for the workforce (Pohl, 2013)—policies which affected a disproportionate number of minorities such as Latinos and African Americans as time passed (Thompson, 2016).

The increase use of these harsh discipline methods were due to several factors; however, the primary factors that prompted schools to pursue harsher discipline policies were the get-tough federal drug and crime policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Shah & McNeil, 2013). The implementation of severe discipline polices were deemed necessary to

send the message that certain behaviors were not going to be tolerated. In the 1980s, as a way to calm the fears of school violence, calls were made to severely punish guns, drugs, and weapons violations with suspensions, expulsions, and even jail time (Thompson, 2016); Moreover, the use of zero-tolerance policies also promoted the increase of technology and security personnel.

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Gun-Free School Act, which required any school that received federal funds to expel for a year any student who was caught with the possession of a firearm; additionally, with the passing of time, calls were made to implement the same severe reprimands to much lesser violations and misbehaviors (Skiba, 2014). As a result, schools and districts throughout the nation began to severely punish much lesser offenses such as truancy, dress code violations, classroom disruptions, and inappropriate use of language with more severe consequences such as expulsion, suspensions, fines, and even criminal charges (Robinett, 2012; Shah & McNeil, 2013).

Since the implementation of these zero-tolerance policies, the number of students affected by these practices have been disproportionate (Thompson, 2016). These disciplinary measures have affected more African American, Native Americans, and Latinos than any other sector of the population (Hernandes-Melis et al., 2016), increasing the possibility of these groups of students to become permanent members of the judicial prison system, struggle in school, and never graduate. Another important factors is that these severe measures do not appear to discriminate between socio-economics status, as minorities are more likely to be suspended and expelled in equal percentage from affluent schools (Skiba & Losen, 2016). In addition, recent data shows other minority groups, such as the disabled, black and Latina females, and LBGT students, are also the target of more severe punishment (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

Despite the social acceptance of more severe punitive measures in American schools, data and research shows that these measures have not provided the desired results. Since the 1980s, schools and districts have increased their investment in safety resources, such as

cameras and security personnel, including the creation of police forces by many school districts. However, studies have shown that these measures have provided very little relief in the decrease of violent and disruptive behavior (Skiba & Losen, 2016). An increasing number of studies are also starting to show the negative effects of severe punitive measures in schools, failing to corroborate the belief that harsher punishments result in better school safety (Shah & McNeil, 2013). These results indicate that schools with higher suspensions and expulsion rates tends to have lower academic performance (Skiba et al., 2014). Additionally, students with a history of suspensions are more likely to be repeat offenders, developing a higher risk for anti-social behavior. Finally, the use of severe reprimands increase the likelihood of a student becoming part of the juvenile justice system. According to Skiba and Losen (2016), this has led to organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, to highlight the ineffectiveness of severe reprimands in decreasing misbehaviors and improving school safety.

### 3. The Positive Strategies

In recent years, however, a number of positive interventions have been implemented that have been found to be effective in improving behavior and school safety. These measures are characterized by the common use of three components: 1) the promotion of positive relationships within the schools; 2) the use of approaches that encourage students to become more conscious of their social behavior; and 3) the institutional use of positive intervention practices and student-friendly disciplinary codes.

An increasing number of research is showing that a better teacher-student relationship promote better academic results and reduce misbehavior, especially for minorities. The practice of promoting better relationships are based in some fundamental principles: 1) the creation of schools as centers of community; 2) a personal relationship between teachers and students; and 3) the implementation of rigorous academic expectations. The result is

that schools that encourage such practices tend to severely decrease their misbehavior cases, while noticeably improving academic performance (Robinett, 2012). Such is the case of Denver Public Schools, which saw their suspensions and expulsions decrease by 47 percent after the adoptions of programs that encouraged teachers to seek better relationship with their students (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Schools that have positive discipline outcomes tend to develop learning environments that incite students to become more aware of their social behavior. These kind of programs that promote social-emotional learning, as defined by Skiba and Losen (2016), vary widely across the nation; however, these programs tend to share some common characteristics: 1) teach students behavioral management skills; 2) establish the appreciation for diverse views; 3) promote the creation of student-centered learning and social goals; and 4) encourage the students to handle interpersonal situations. In recent years, the creation of student-lead support groups is becoming more common, which have helped teachers and administrators in dealing with the early warning of potential misbehavior, which has led to reduction in the implementation of severe reprimands by schools that have successfully implemented these measures (Shah & McNeil, 2013).

The institutional use of more positive intervention practices and student-friendly disciplinary codes can have a major impact in the reduction of discipline misbehaviors (Robinett, 2012; Thompson, 2016). Studies have shown that changes in the structure of discipline codes that implement more positive interventions have resulted in the reduction of expulsions and suspensions in school, yielding positive academic results. However, as Skiba and Losen (2016) argue, these practices will require schools and districts to become aware of their social disparities, including identifying the social ‘enablers’ and ‘barriers’ that students encounters in the learning environment. For example, research has shown that schools that implement early response teams that identify potential scenarios of misbehavior tend to reduce violent and disruptive incidents by at least 25 percent among minority groups (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Finally, the implementation of more student-friendly codes of conduct can also positively impact a school. Recent calls have been made to limit expulsions and suspensions for the most severe of disciplinary cases. In recent years, according to Shah and McNeil (2013), schools district across the nation are revising their codes of conducts to revise the consequences for minor incidents such as tardiness, inappropriate language, and classroom disruptions (Robinett, 2012), focusing on more positive alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. However, we must be aware that such changes must be accompanied with better training, more resources, and effective administrative support.

#### **4. Practical understanding of positive reinforcement**

Skinner (1953) introduced the theory of operant conditioning—a system of learning that occurs through the association of rewards and punishments through the use of reinforcement. With operant conditioning, good behavior is associated with positive or negative reinforcements, and bad behavior is associated with positive or negative punishment. For example, if Kate does all her homework and behaves well during a particular week, the teacher may reward Kate with extra playing time and the removal of a low grade. In this instance, the addition of extra playing time is a positive reinforcement, while the removal of a low grade is an example of a negative reinforcement. However, if Kate misbehaves and does not do her homework, the teacher might punish her by taking away her cell phone and making Kate stay an extra hour after school. The removal of the cell phone is an example of negative punishment, while staying an extra hour after school is an example of positive punishment. Despite its obvious benefits, most teachers and administrators continue to have reservations about using reinforcements as a tool for discipline and classroom management (Maag, 2003). It is speculated that teachers continue to underutilize behavior-managing tools to positively and productively confront possible challenging behaviors from students because they lack the confidence to implement them.

This has shown to be problematic for educational settings because students' behaviors become especially challenging when traditional approaches do not yield the expected results. With the new inclusion paradigm and different cultural values, the old punishment models do not seem to work with about 5% of the students (Maag, 2003). The negative results to teaching and learning are significant, especially when the actions of a few students can disrupt the learning of the majority in a given class. The successful learning environment often indicates a successful classroom management plan (Clement, 2010). Disruptive environments are not conducive to good learning experiences, which affects the overall academic achievement.

## 5. Implementation

Since the implementation of Skinner's (1953) work, techniques based on positive reinforcement have been well developed and implemented, yielding positive results (DiTullio, 2014). These techniques produce better academic success; moreover, they are adaptable and easy to implement in any behavior situation or discipline challenge. Several of them are presented here:

**5.1 Rewarding Good Behavior.** This is one of the easiest and most effective ways for dealing with challenging behaviors (Maag, 1999). I am perplexed at why teachers ignore students behaving well; this method is easy to use and provides great teachable moments for the whole class. I use this technique frequently. Any time student exhibits an appropriate behavior, I always take time out to praise the student and use it as a teachable moment. One of the kids who had a bad reputation called me "Coach Kelly" one day. I took the time to praise him in front of the class for addressing me appropriately, using it as a teaching moment to discuss manners. All the kids began to follow suit. They even started correcting each other when someone regressed back to simply "Mister." This takes less time than punishing bad behavior, because the students feel good about themselves and we move on. Punishment takes away class time and can invite other bad behavior.



**5.2 Small Unit Thinking.** When dealing with many challenging behaviors, or one major one, it is better to deal with them one at a time or in small units in the case of a big one (Roberts, 2002). Example: I had a self-contained classroom and was dealing with many behavior problems, including tardiness every period. The other teachers were complaining, so I was forced to deal with the tardiness issue immediately. It was here where I learned to think small. After stopping their tardiness using a token economy, I learned it was easier and more effective to deal with their other behaviors one at a time. A benefit to this success is the positive effect it had on the students' attitudes. They seemed to gain a sense of confidence that they could effectively handle their other behavior problems. Thinking small also works in presenting academic work; present material in small amounts and let the students achieve small successes. They will gain so much confidence that future failures will not set them back. They will remain on task longer and cause fewer disruptions.

**5.3 Promoting a Group Management Plan.** This is the most important ingredient in developing a positive classroom management system. There are two dynamics at work: it allows students to have ownership, and it provides for group (peer) influence (Rhode et al, 1995). The control is in ownership. The more the students have a choice on what they are going to do the better they behave and perform. Ownership works equally well with both behavior and performance. Example: I got the class together and we made our class rules a class project. We discussed issues like the type of teacher they wanted, how they wanted to be treated by each other and me, and what the consequences would be. We put it into a contract that was signed by all and displayed prominently in the classroom for everyone to see and for a reminder when necessary. We still had issues from time to time, but they were always handled in class. In addition to control, the power of peer pressure can be very positive and is really effective in a group setting. It helps build community.

**5.4 Promoting Trust.** Try to look for ways to establish trust. Plan them if needed. Do what you say you are going to do (Roberts, 2002). Your students must recognize the honor in your actions. It is very powerful because it changes the entire class into a family. When my

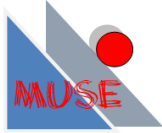
students were in the general classroom they liked to get in trouble so they could go home. Once they were assigned to me, I told them that they were never going to the office. We would handle all problems in the classroom. What was said and done in our room would stay inside the room. When my students understood that I meant what I said they responded superbly by improving their attendance and doing much more class work. They felt safe.

**5.5 Promote Choices and Consequences** The teacher and the students must establish together both positive and negative consequences for an action or inaction (Roberts, 2002). It is very important that the students know they have a choice and understand what consequences will be implemented when the student makes a choice. “You do this and you get to do this”. “You stop this behavior and you will be able to do this”. I used outside playtime as a positive consequence for completing their lessons. The negative consequence was less or no outside activity. I cannot emphasize enough how well this procedure worked in changing their behavior on a permanent basis.

## 6. Conclusion

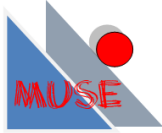
These techniques are a common sense approach, and they are easy to apply; however, teachers are more accustomed to the use of punishment. It is easier for them to apply it, while administrators continue to advocate for its use. In the end, it will require teachers and administrators to change their own behaviors if they wish to positively change the students’ behavior.

However, this change can prove to be difficult. Four things must happen in order for this transformation to occur: First, a proper training and implementation system must be developed that helps the teachers, novice and veterans, to learn and apply new behavior modification techniques such as the five suggestions described in this paper; second, administrators must support this new system, encouraging the teachers with incentives, money, and professional development opportunities; third, teachers and administrators must buy into the new paradigm of today’s classroom and the reality of a more diverse



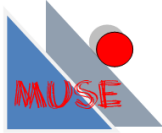
learning environment; and fourth, education colleges and teacher preparation programs will have to be more in-tune with the current realities and challenges of today's public schools.

Research indicates that positive behavior modification techniques are more effective than punishment. Structured positive and negative reinforcement foster learning by reducing classroom disruptions and increasing student attention. If these four suggestions are put in place, then, we can witness the successful use of scientifically proven procedures and methods for proactively and positively managing student behavior. Students will be empowered to acquire the knowledge and skills that they will need to achieve academic success.



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