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Using rewards and sanctions in the classroom: pupils' perceptions of their own responses to current behaviour management strategies

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The use of systems of rewards and sanctions within behaviour policies has now been adopted formally in UK schools. Such systems potentially represent competing theoretical ideas when considered alongside current approaches to teaching and learning. There is also opportunity for inconsistent use of rewards and sanctions resulting from the absence of a distinction between incentives and punishments and again between pupils' task-based work and their social behaviour. This case study comprises one of three questionnaire surveys completed by UK secondary school pupils in Year 7 and Year 11. The findings show a complex range of pupil responses to different behaviour management strategies, as well as highlighting changes in pupil responses across the age groups. Some sanctions for classroom behaviour are also found to lead pupils to stay quiet, potentially affecting their ability to engage in all learning activities. Sanctions such as asking pupils to miss break, or giving detentions, are seen to be counter-productive in encouraging pupils to work hard in class. Some rewards, such as the giving of "stamps" work well in relation to how much pupils like the teacher, but they are not found to promote hard work in older pupils. The incentive of the school reward trip is universally effective, as is contact with home. These findings offer insight into the ways in which pupils respond to rewards and sanctions and therefore contribute to our understanding of how such systems might best be used.

Keywords: rewards and sanctions; pupil perceptions; classroom behaviour

The introduction of whole school behaviour policies in the UK has brought with it compulsory adoption of systems of rewards and sanctions. These systems are based on behaviourist principles of reinforcement and punishment as motivators for changing patterns of behaviour (Watson 1931; Ullman and Krasner 1965, 2). Despite the fact that behaviourist approaches have been all but lost in other areas of teaching and learning, where understanding from cognitive psychology and constructivism has taken their place (Bandura 1986; Zimmerman 1990; Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning 1995; Phillips 1995), behaviourist ideas continue in discussions about classroom management and the on-going problem of some pupils' social behaviour.

The present study is part of a larger project that is exploring teachers' classroom language in relation to pupils' social behaviour, and it is difficult to speak of this without first understanding the behaviour management policies within which teachers are working. A key source of information about the efficacy of rewards and

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sanctions is going to be the pupils themselves, because they can provide vital information about how they perceive the school rules. The data in this study derive from what was intended to be a small pilot study to test the effectiveness and reliability of a range of questions and to check for problematic wordings that might draw ambiguous responses. In particular, the intention was to design a discrete series of questions that would be answered in consistent and meaningful ways across secondary school pupils from Year 7 (age 11–12) to Year 11 (age 15–16 and the end of assessment for GCSE). What transpired was a far larger data-set, borne of the unexpected generosity of a partner school, comprising over 3000 paper questionnaires. This has facilitated the present case study, the initial findings from which are discussed here; more detailed discussions on each of a series of themes are being undertaken in forthcoming publications.

Carrying out surveys of school pupils' perceptions is by no means a novel idea (Houghton, Merrett, and Wheldall 1988; Caffyn 1989; Harrop and Holmes 1993; Beaman and Wheldall 2000; Miller, Ferguson, and Byrne 2000; Shreeve et al. 2002; Infantino and Little 2005; Reid et al. 2010) and there is evidence that findings can be used very effectively. One study tracked the same teachers and the same pupil cohort to gauge the effect of the adoption of a set of strategies that pupils had reported were most useful. The study showed changes in on-task behaviour, rates of positive and negative feedback, disruptive incidents, detentions and the use of merits across time (Swinson 2010). Similarly, one early study found that asking teachers to actively both reduce reprimands and increase their use of praise led to an increase in on-task behaviour (Houghton et al. 1990). The two changes in this study showed independent benefits, adopting the use of hand counters as an aide memoire to teachers; it was also found that the reduced number of "public interruptions" (p. 263) helped other pupils. Despite such findings, there is still inconsistency in the use of systems of rewards and sanctions, as well as some asymmetry between research and policy.

Background to the use of rewards and sanctions in the classroom

In the 1960s, the adoption of behaviourist ideas in teaching and learning (Watson 1931; Skinner 1953) was accompanied by the phenomenon of the passive pupil, something that is problematic in relation to subsequent learning models (Bandura 1986; Zimmerman 1990). Behaviourist approaches to teaching brought with them the idea that "correct" responses to questions and tasks would be rewarded and reinforced, leading to a clearer grasp for the learner of whatever topic was at hand. Following behaviourist principles, learners and teachers maintained a clear idea of behavioural objectives, with the level of learning that was achieved then being measured against those objectives. There remain traces of these approaches in such structures as *aims of the lesson* or *today's learning objectives* that are sometimes displayed on a board for pupils and teachers to share; such goals nod to behaviourism in the ease of measurement of whether or not they have been achieved.

That behaviourist ideas should endure in approaches to classroom management is not wholly surprising. Behaviourism suggests that by rewarding desirable patterns of behaviour and punishing undesirable patterns, the undesirable ones will eventually fade away and leave only those behaviours that are regarded as conducive to learning. However, such approaches continue to lean on the idea of a passive pupil and fail to explore a range of motivators that could potentially serve the matter of classroom management more effectively. Moreover, the idea that "incorrect"

responses can be overlooked or ignored in order to reduce their likelihood of repetition might not transpose easily from behaviour associated with lesson topics such as Geography or Physics to some more challenging classroom social behaviours where pupils are not on task.

Where behaviourist ideas incorporate the anticipation of rewards, rather than relying solely upon past contingencies, behaviourism itself can include a theoretical strand that relates to theories of motivation. Such ideas can be seen in ideas about goal-setting and expectations of outcomes (Tolman 1949; Locke and Latham 2002; Schunk 2014), notwithstanding the complex relationship between goals and habits (Wood and Neal 2007). For classroom management, this means that approaches that are rooted in behaviourist principles do not necessarily rely solely upon pupils' memory of behaviours that had been reinforced in the past: the fuller behaviourist models allow for pupil behaviour that is motivated by the anticipation of external consequences and includes ways in which we might predict what is likely to act as a reinforcer (Bandura 1971; Premack 1971). This predictive element makes consistency in the use of classroom management practices very important, particularly given the unique nature of classroom environments; there will be specific expectations in classroom situations that do not necessarily exist elsewhere in pupils' lives. Similarly, ideas about positive outcomes that are attributed to chance, such as the mood of the teacher, are unlikely to represent strong motivators because pupils have no control over the output. Problems with the distinction between extinguishing a behaviour-in-progress and affecting future behaviour clearly arise (Wood and Neal 2007), as do issues with understanding the respective roles of negative and positive reinforcers (Kohn 1993; Maag 2001).

Such limit setting approaches to behaviour management rely on the implicit imbalance of power between teachers and pupils, a sense of which is captured by Lee and Marlene Canter (Canter and Canter 2001) in their use of the term "assertive discipline". In this specific model, sanctions and rules are pre-set, allowing no room for professional discretion; this approach is typified by an uneasy peace between "control of" and "warmth towards" pupils. Despite the fact that some teachers perceive improvement in pupil behaviour, there is little evidence of real change following training in assertive discipline (Emmer and Aussiker 1990).

The emergence of *cognitive theories* in the 1980s (Bandura 1986; Zimmerman 1990) saw a move away from the extrinsic motivators of rewards and punishments, bringing a new focus on a deeper exploration of the way in which learners handle new information in relation to that already stored in their memories. The focus was largely on the way in which information was presented. In terms of social behaviour in the classroom, this move to information processing models added nothing to the prevailing approaches, though in some ways it saw the important parting of the ways between subject teaching and classroom management. The efficacy of the new approaches to learning depended upon teachers being able to maintain suitable learning environments, but the strategies used to teach topic or task-based ideas were now markedly different from the strategies used to teach social behaviour. It could be argued that pupils themselves would develop different expectations in relation to the ways in which they acquired new behaviours and that the dual approach might itself present difficulties. It was also still the case in these models that the learner remained somehow passive in the overall learning process; this would not change until the emergence of *metacognitive processes* and the associated ideas of self-regulated, or self-motivated learners in the late 1980s,

where learners were seen to direct their own learning processes (Bandura 1986; Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach 1996).

As responsibility for learning started to pass to the learner, so the teacher's role became less one of imparter-of-information and more one of supporter-and-guide. Ideas of apprenticeship, where the teacher models approaches rather than imposes them, are borne out in theories of *Communities of Practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), developed alongside understanding about the effectiveness of working with other learners to both achieve new insights and maintain a sense of ownership of knowledge. Ideas about inclusion and sense of self emerge here, with learning taking place much more easily in situations where individuals feel fully involved (Thomas 2013). Theories of self-determination and motivation (Dweck 1986; Zimmerman 1990; Dweck 1999; Ryan and Deci 2000; Henderlong and Lepper 2002; Henderlong Corpus and Lepper 2007) became closely associated with ideas about teaching and learning, but they were not reflected in ideas about social behaviour and classroom management, where behaviourist principles persisted.

The current use of systems of rewards and sanctions

The introduction of whole-school behaviour policies in UK schools has brought with it integral systems of rewards and sanctions. The behaviourist ideas that underpin these strategies represent a potentially confused set of aims and theoretical principles. Schools' legal requirements are laid down in the *Education and Inspections Act* (Department for Education 2006), under which school governing bodies are required to consult with headteachers, staff, parents and pupils, and to establish the principles of their school's behaviour policy. The headteacher is then required to determine measures that are aimed at encouraging good behaviour and respect, paying particular attention to preventing racial harassment and bullying; schools have statutory powers to impose sanctions. As part of their behaviour policy, schools are required to implement a formal system of rewards and sanctions: pupils are told how they are expected to behave and are aware of the rewards when they meet these expectations, and the sanctions that will be imposed should they fail to comply.

A typical shape for these approaches is that each pupil is a member of a *form* that is overseen by a *form tutor* during morning and afternoon registration sessions, as well as during a one-hour weekly *form period*. The form period is devoted largely to the administration of the school behaviour policy and the form tutors are the main contact point through which subject teachers feedback their comments about individual pupils' behaviour. Each pupil is given a school *planner*, similar to a diary, into which s/he writes the timetable for that academic year and notes down homework for each subject. The planners are intended to be with pupils at all times and it is through the planner system that individual teachers communicate both with parents and with the pupils' form tutors, by writing notes and comments about both the pupils' work and their social behaviour. Each week parents are expected to sign their child's planner to show they have seen it and read any notes that have been entered. Form tutors check planners at the weekly form periods and keep a running total of the number of entries that individual subject teachers have made. It is possible for a pupil to receive adverse comments in her planner in relation to her social behaviour, and still be rewarded for attendance and class work, showing a distinction between task-oriented and behaviour-oriented goals.

The first level of reward is usually teachers' *use of praise*, and pupils receive praise for complying with classroom rules such as sitting quietly, attending to the lesson, and answering questions correctly. The second level of reward is the giving of a stamp (using an ink stamper), which the teacher prints in the pupil's planner. The first level of sanctions involves a request from the teacher that certain types of behaviour are altered or cease. This might be a request for a pupil to stop walking around the classroom during the lesson, or might equally be a request for a pupil to attend to a lesson-based task. The second level of sanctions involves the teacher given a pupil a more formal *verbal warning*.

Rewards and sanctions are both given on a cumulative basis. Once a pupil has three (positive) stamps s/he receives a *merit*, and once a pupil has received three (negative) verbal warnings s/he receives a *negative* comment written in their planner. As well as negative comments that result from the collection of three verbal warnings pupils are automatically given negative comments in their planners for certain specific reasons, typically lack of equipment (an "E" is entered in the planner); incorrect uniform ("U"); failure to hand in homework ("H") and undesirable social behaviour ("B"). It is an expectation of the system that each pupil places his or her open planner on the desks during class, so that teachers can use the planners to record comments and stamps during the lesson.

Where a pupil has received three negative comments s/he is expected to attend a *whole school detention*; three detentions add up to a day in *isolation*, where the pupil spends a day completing work alone, away from the rest of the class. Pupils can also receive praise from senior teachers in a more formal meeting, as well as having post-cards sent home to commend their progress. There is an on-going element to the behaviour policy, where pupils who complete the school year without being placed in isolation are typically invited to join a whole school trip to a local pleasure park. Pupils who have spent time in isolation are excluded from this outing and they are expected to attend school and complete pre-set work on the day of the trip.

On a day-to-day basis in the classroom this system of rewards and sanctions is enacted through ongoing references to warnings and to stamps; the cumulative effects of the scheme are really only referred to during form periods where form tutors make a tally of each pupil's stamps and negative comments. The weekly form period is very important, in that it is the only lesson where pupil's social behaviour is the topic, or *task*. The distinction between *task* and *behaviour* informs the questions in the survey being discussed here, but is discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Payne-Woolridge 2010).

Previous findings regarding the use of rewards and sanctions in the classroom

It is clear that these systems of rewards and sanctions rely upon certain assumptions about the nature of motivation. Evidence can be found to support the view that *extrinsic* forms of motivation, defined as "the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan and Deci 2000, 71), can actually have an adverse impact on *intrinsic* motivation, though the relationship between rewards and intrinsic motivation is a complicated one (Cameron and Pierce 1994; Lepper, Keavney, and Drake 1996; Ryan and Deci 1996). Research findings in this area are not conclusive, but there is also evidence to suggest that school children are unlikely to be reliably motivated by extrinsic rewards (Lepper 1988; Kohn 1996; Lepper, Keavney, and Drake 1996; Kohn 1999; Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 2001; Joussemet

et al. 2004). Other findings relating to pupils' perceptions of rewards and sanctions have indicated that pupils tend to perceive rewards as strongly linked to work, and sanctions as strongly linked to behaviour (Shreeve et al. 2002). This suggestion is echoed in much of the literature regarding teachers' use of praise in the classroom (Houghton et al. 1990; Beaman and Wheldall 2000; Burnett 2002; Henderlong and Lepper 2002; Kalis, Vannest, and Parker 2007; Payne-Woolridge 2010; Pisacreta et al. 2011; Simonsen et al. 2013) and is one that reflects the dual approaches to learning in relation to task and behaviour. It is also important to note that pupils experience systems of rewards and sanctions both directly and vicariously: what pupils observe happening to others is part of their understanding of the system, with classmates effectively modelling teacher responses. In this way, vicarious consequences serve to inform individual pupils and potentially contribute to their own perceptions (Bandura 1986; Schunk 2014).

Early studies carried out in British primary schools have also shown that pupils regard rewards and praise as more suitable for classroom subject work than for behaviour (Merrett and Tang 1994), notwithstanding the fact that the value pupils attach to praise has previously been found to diminish as the pupils get older (Houghton, Merrett, and Wheldall 1988). Primary school children were also found to value the opinion of their teachers more than they valued that of their peers (Merrett and Tang 1994). The primary children regarded sending letters home to parents, particularly letters of praise, to be an effective tool, thereby highlighting the importance of parental approval. It has also been seen that primary school children agree on the effectiveness of rewards but disagree over the way sanctions are weighted in schools; in addition, public reprimands were found to be more effective than those given privately (Miller, Ferguson, and Simpson 1998), perhaps suggesting differences in the way that pupils' needs are constructed where there is an audience.

Shreeve et al. (2002) highlight the importance of teachers' relationships with pupils and found that "good teachers" motivated students and managed behaviour without use of any formal system of rewards; feedback from the students themselves confirmed this (Shreeve et al. 2002). Mansfield (2007) shows that the way in which pupils perceive the use of rewards and sanctions has been found to impact on their sense of belonging in the school, and this in turn can affect both academic performance and social behaviour (Mansfield 2007). Similarly, pupils' attachment to school is greater when teachers care, use praise and treat pupils in a way that is perceived to be fair (Hallinan 2008). Pupils' compliance with rules is also linked to how fair pupils perceive the rules to be, as well as to the extent to which the pupil-teacher relationship is positive (Way 2011).

Way (2011) also shows that deterrents do not seem to work, as higher perceived strictness in the rules does not lead to greater pupil compliance. Pupils appear to be making up their own minds whether or not to accept rules, and severe punishments might actually lead to defiance and further disruptive behaviour (Way 2011). Similar findings in relation to consistency and fairness – especially not being shouted at – are also seen elsewhere, as is the importance of the pupil-teacher relationship (Reid et al. 2010). In addition to this, Way (2011) has found that policies that are authoritarian in nature tend to be over-applied to minority pupils, suggesting there are potential issues for inclusion.

Turning to secondary school teachers' perceptions of pupil behaviour, differences have been found across age ranges, with *talking-out-of-turn*, or *TOOTing*, seen to decline as pupils get older (Little 2005). Acts of severe aggression are sufficiently

infrequent to be less troublesome than the more prevalent TOOTing and *hindering-other-children*, or *HOC*, and idleness, or being off-task, has been found to increase as pupils move through the school (Little 2005).

Methodological issues

The aim of the present case study is to gather a meaningful data-set that reflects the views of secondary school pupils who are experiencing the current wave of rewards and sanctions. In particular, this study aims to take into account various methodological criticisms of previous surveys of pupils' views. In this respect, the lack of contextual information found in previous questionnaires (Caffyn 1989) has been addressed in the familiar nature of the examples chosen to frame the questions. Also, by using contextual questions, pupils are guided away from ideas about what might be perceived as a "correct" response, to one that is more realistic and more likely to be accurate; this move is to draw pupils away from ideas about whether or not they "like" the classroom strategies teachers are using (Caffyn 1989, 210). It is understandable that the approaches liked by pupils will not necessarily be those that are effective in modifying behaviour (Harrop and Holmes 1993, 30).

A clear distinction has also been maintained here between rewards and sanctions, and again between responses that relate to classroom tasks and those that relate to classroom behaviour. By way of contrast, Harrop and Holmes (1993) requested primary school pupils to rank responses in terms of "helping them to work and behave in school", thereby conflating two important points (Harrop and Holmes 1993, 30). Attention is also given to findings from early studies that make a distinction between "public" and "private" reprimands (Houghton et al. 1990), as well as understanding that age is a factor, with older pupils having been found to appreciate less public interactions with teachers (Houghton, Merrett, and Wheldall 1988).

The study

The school involved in this case study is a mixed sex comprehensive providing for approximately 1100 pupils across the 11–18 age range. The current study was initially intended as a small pilot to check the reliability of a range of questions and to explore pupils' consistency in responding to a questionnaire. The large data-set that emerged comprises responses from almost the entire pupil population. It is from this data-set that I now draw out key findings and then discuss them in terms of the comparison between responses from pupils in Year 7 and pupils in Year 11; this comparison is intended to identify potential changes in patterns as pupils mature.

There are three separate questionnaires in the survey. The first questionnaire, which is discussed here, required pupils to indicate how they would respond to the following 18 scenarios:

- (1) I was told off in front of the class
- (2) I was given a verbal warning
- (3) I was told off in private
- (4) I got low marks
- (5) I got bad comments on my work
- (6) I got detention
- (7) I got lots of stamps

- (8) I was not allowed on school trip
- (9) School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well
- (10) My whole class got told off
- (11) School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school
- (12) I got a bad school report
- (13) I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate
- (14) I was given extra work to do
- (15) I was made to sit at the front
- (16) I was sent out of class
- (17) I was made to miss break
- (18) I was put on report

Pupils were asked to tick as many of the following *response options* as they saw fit:

- (1) Like the teacher
- (2) Do less work
- (3) Behave well
- (4) Mess about
- (5) Switch off completely
- (6) Stay quiet
- (7) Dislike the teacher
- (8) Work hard

These options were selected to give some sense of the range of anticipated or acceptable responses to the pupils completing the questionnaires.

Responses to questions 14, 15 and 16 were subsequently withdrawn from the analysis, because there was ambiguity about the reasoning behind the action. For example, some pupils regarded sitting at the front as a sign they were doing well, whilst others responded as if being moved to the front is a punishment.

The remaining questions gauge pupils' responses to key areas outlined by previous studies, and responses were grouped for analysis as follows:

Group One

Questions 1, 3, and 13 reflect degrees of privacy when being reprimanded:

- (1) I was told off in front of the class
- (3) I was told off in private
- (13) I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate

Group Two

Questions 2, 6, 7 and 8 relate to specific strategies from the school behaviour policy, reflecting both extrinsic motivators and the use of reprimands:

- (2) I was given a verbal warning
- (6) I got detention

- (7) I got lots of stamps
- (8) I was not allowed on school trip

Group Three

Questions 4, 5 and 12 deal with performance at tasks:

- (4) I got low marks
- (5) I got bad comments on my work
- (12) I got a bad school report

Group Four

Questions 10, 17 and 18 cover other common classroom management strategies that are not necessarily explicit parts of the school behaviour policy:

- (10) My whole class got told off
- (17) I was made to miss break
- (18) I was put on report

Group Five

Questions 9 and 11 deal explicitly with contact with parents:

- (9) School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well
- (11) School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school

Core findings from Year 7 and Year 11

Findings from the questionnaire are shown here by year group and by question group. This is followed by two lists that show key findings in relation to pupils' task-based work in the classroom and key findings in relation to pupils' social behaviour in the classroom.

When responding to the questionnaire, several pupils chose more than one response option to each scenario; so an average of 1.77 responses per question were received from 240 pupils in Year 7 and an average of 1.55 responses per question from 186 pupils in Year 11. All responses have been converted to percentages of the number of pupils responding and, because of the multiple responses, the totals always exceed 100%.

In order to highlight key aspects of the patterns of responses, the findings are shown here by question group. In addition to this, and in order to give some sense of the nature of pupil responses across the questionnaire as a whole, the highest scoring pupil response option across all 18 questions is italicised and emboldened. This way, each of the eight response options (*like teacher, do less work, behave well, mess about, switch off, stay quiet, dislike teacher, work hard*) is highlighted only once. Where mean values are supplied they are the mean response for a particular pupil reaction across all 18 questions.

Core findings: Year 7*Group One – being reprimanded*

- (1) I was told off in front of the class
- (3) I was told off in private
- (13) I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate

Group One relates solely to pupils' social behaviour and not to their task-based school work. There is little here to suggest that Year 7 pupils would *switch off*, *do less work*, or respond by not *behaving well* (Table 1). There is, however, a clear indication that pupils' response to teachers is at stake when comparing the privacy of a quiet word with a more public admonishment.

More important, perhaps, is the *stay quiet* response that is consistently high (mean 31% overall, 43% across these three questions) and where *being told off in front of the class* (Q1) shows the highest number of *stay quiet* responses (52%) across all 18 questions in the questionnaire.

Group Two – strategies from the whole-school behaviour policy

- (2) I was given a verbal warning
- (6) I got detention
- (7) I got lots of stamps
- (8) I was not allowed on school trip

This group includes the highest number of responses in five areas; the formal behaviour system appears to engage pupils in several ways, resulting in them *liking the teacher*, *behaving well* and *staying quiet* (Table 2). Again, the main issue at stake in this group is the relationship with the teacher, and there is a clear indication that the positive reward system based on stamps is extremely effective. As for *staying quiet*, pupils did not seem to need to mention this for Q7, possibly thinking that *liking the teacher* and *working hard* were sufficient responses. The system of verbal warnings and detentions (sanctions) does not produce the same *work hard* response as the acquisition of stamps (rewards), but does promote more *stay quiet* responses.

The most interesting question in this group relates to being disallowed from going on the school trip, an extrinsic motivator: this scores highest across the 18 questions for *do less work* and attracts the third lowest response for *behave well* (with *got low marks* 22% and *got bad comments on my work* 27% in Group Three). It has the highest response for *mess about* (16%) and for *switch off completely* (22%). In contrast, it attracts the lowest response for *work hard* (20%) across the 18

Table 1. Group One – being reprimanded (Year 7).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q1	3%	7%	45%	4%	11%	52%	35%	39%
Q3	10%	4%	42%	3%	8%	42%	20%	35%
Q13	13%	3%	46%	5%	7%	37%	15%	55%

Table 2. Group Two – strategies from the whole-school behaviour policy (Year 7).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q2	2%	5%	49%	8%	4%	49%	13%	31%
Q6	0%	9%	45%	8%	17%	36%	39%	23%
Q7	83%	1%	43%	2%	0%	11%	2%	42%
Q8	2%	18%	30%	16%	22%	23%	53%	20%

questions, and is second only to Q17 (*made to miss break* 56%) in terms of *dislike teacher* (53%).

Group Three – performance in task-based work

- (4) I got low marks
- (5) I got bad comments on my work
- (12) I got a bad school report

Group Three questions relate directly to the quality of pupils' school work. It is immediately clear that pupils who receive unfavourable feedback on their work claim that they will be motivated to work harder. However, it is more interesting to note that *getting low marks* is the most effective motivator for *working hard* across all 18 questions (81% compared to range 20–56% for the other 17 questions) and also the negative factor least likely to have an adverse effect on pupils' view of the teacher (5% versus 13–56%). Of interest too is the higher score within Group Three for *behave well* when a bad report is sent home, perhaps highlighting the role of parental (dis)approval (Table 3).

Questions 4 and 5 attract the lowest overall responses for *behave well*, suggesting that *getting low marks* and *receiving bad comments* are not effective motivators for encouraging pupils to *behave well* even though they claim it would make them apply themselves to *working harder*; there is no equivalent high response for *mess about* or *switch off* to suggest behaviour would deteriorate in these areas.

What poor feedback does *not* do is prompt pupils to give up, nor does it lead to the raised level of *stay quiet* responses that were seen in Group One, where the subject of the admonishment was the pupils' behaviour, rather than the pupils' work. It should therefore be noted that *work hard* does not equate to *stay quiet*.

Table 3. Group Three – performance in task-based work (Year 7).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q4	3%	2%	22%	4%	6%	22%	5%	81%
Q5	2%	8%	27%	4%	8%	26%	33%	52%
Q12	1%	8%	45%	6%	12%	25%	33%	56%

Group Four – other sanctions

- (10) My whole class got told off
- (17) I was made to miss break
- (18) I was put on report

Being made to miss break has the highest overall score for *disliking the teacher* (56%) and is the only punishment that causes pupils to *dislike the teacher* more than if they are *not allowed on the school trip* (53%, Q8, Group Two.) There are also above average responses for *switch off* and *mess about* to Q17, as well as a below average response for *behave well* (Table 4).

Being *put on report* (Q18), which is not a formal part of the school behaviour policy, attracts the highest number of responses for *behave well*, and is exceeded only by *not being allowed on the school trip* and *missing break* in relation to *disliking the teacher*. *Whole class punishment* (Q10) leads pupils to claim that they will *stay quiet* and *behave well*, this may be out of a sense of peer affiliation and a wish not to be the cause of further whole class condemnation.

Group Five – contact with home

- (9) School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well
- (11) School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school

Positive reports home (73%) are exceeded only by *receiving stamps* (83%) in relation to *liking the teacher*. For *behave well* (48%) positive reports home are on a par with receiving a *verbal warning* (49%, Q2) and *being put on report* (49%, Q18), suggesting that in relation to pupils' social behaviour, incentives are as effective as sanctions (Table 5).

Table 4. Group Four – Other sanctions (Year 7).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q10	3%	6%	45%	10%	9%	47%	31%	29%
Q17	1%	9%	34%	11%	15%	29%	56%	23%
Q18	3%	5%	49%	7%	15%	32%	41%	38%

Table 5. Group Five – Contact with home (Year 7).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q9	2%	5%	39%	8%	11%	28%	40%	51%
Q11	73%	0%	48%	2%	2%	15%	2%	49%

While *negative reports being sent home* might be seen as having the potential to damage the *relationship with the teacher*, there is little evidence of this, and it does not seem to have an adverse impact on *behaving well* or *working hard*.

Core findings: Year 11

Group One – being reprimanded

- (1) I was told off in front of the class
- (3) I was told off in private
- (13) I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate

Year 11 pupils' responses in Group One appear to reflect appreciation of less public reprimands, with the highest number of *behave well* responses (46%) to being *admonished privately* (range 10–42% across other 17 questions). The highest *do less work* responses (23%) relate to public criticism of behaviour (Table 6). Such public attention also draws high *stay quiet* and *dislike teacher* responses, potentially damaging the *relationship with teachers* and the pupils' engagement with classroom tasks.

Despite the apparent preference for *private admonishments*, the greatest motivator in this group for *work hard* is a quiet word in class; perhaps the idea of being *told off in private* (Q3) seems more formal than an impromptu comment that can be left behind in the classroom.

Group Two – strategies from the whole-school behaviour policy

- (2) I was given a verbal warning
- (6) I got detention
- (7) I got lots of stamps
- (8) I was not allowed on school trip

The formal strategies of the school behaviour policy work in several ways for Year 11 (Table 7). The sanction of a *verbal warning* appears to moderate behaviour, promoting a *stay quiet* response overall, without reflecting *dislike of teacher*. *Detentions* potentially damage the *relationship with the teacher* while seeming to promote *behave well*, but without any impact on *work hard* as a response.

Most notable in terms of the *relationship with the teacher* is the response to *getting stamps*, but again this does not appear to motivate Year 11 pupils to *work hard*, despite a generally high response to *behave well*.

Not being allowed on the school trip prompted the highest *mess about* response overall, but is still not particularly high (25%, mean 19.4%, range 2–19% for other

Table 6. Group One – being reprimanded (Year 11).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q1	1%	23%	23%	10%	20%	45%	46%	14%
Q3	16%	5%	46%	3%	6%	32%	19%	26%
Q13	13%	3%	37%	3%	3%	34%	8%	55%

Table 7. Group Two – strategies from the whole-school behaviour (Year 11).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q2	2%	8%	37%	4%	6%	53%	13%	20%
Q6	1%	11%	33%	9%	14%	26%	39%	14%
Q7	60%	2%	30%	2%	2%	13%	3%	18%
Q8	1%	21%	15%	25%	21%	11%	53%	12%

17 questions). There is also, however, the second highest, above average response for *do less work* (21%, mean 10.9%) and *switch off completely* (21%, mean 11.3%), accompanied by below average responses to *behave well* (15%, mean 25.3%) and *stay quiet* (11%, mean 27.0%); the tendency to respond by *working hard* is also markedly below average (12%, mean 31.4%).

Group Three – feedback on task-based work

- (4) I got low marks
- (5) I got bad comments on my work
- (12) I got a bad school report

For Year 11 pupils, *getting low marks* is the greatest motivator to *work hard*, suggesting perhaps that at this stage in their school career, these pupils regard their overall success to be sufficient motivation (Table 8). The difference in terms of *dislike teacher* between *getting low marks* 8% (Q4) and *getting a bad school report* 30% (Q12), perhaps reflects the public nature of school reports.

The focus overall in this group seems to be related to getting on with school work.

Group Four – other sanctions

- (10) My whole class got told off
- (17) I was made to miss break
- (18) I was put on report

The highest response rates across all 18 questions for *switching off* (23%, mean 11.3%) and *disliking teacher* (70%, mean 30.6%) are found in response to being *made to miss break*, as are raised responses (second highest) to *do less work* (21%, mean 10.9%) and *mess about* (19%, mean 7.8%). Being *put on report* also potentially damages the *relationship with the teacher*, but out of these three sanctions,

Table 8. Group Three – feedback on task-based work (Year 11).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q4	1%	5%	22%	4%	6%	40%	8%	83%
Q5	1%	12%	13%	5%	6%	9%	24%	55%
Q12	1%	4%	33%	3%	10%	20%	30%	48%

Table 9. Group Four – other sanctions (Year 11).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q10	1%	6%	24%	10%	12%	42%	23%	14%
Q17	0%	21%	10%	19%	23%	22%	70%	8%
Q18	1%	8%	32%	9%	13%	23%	50%	32%

only being *put on report* inspires pupils to *work hard*. Again, a public admonishment leads to pupils *staying quiet* (42%, mean 27.0%), but they do not make them *work hard* (14%, mean 31.4%), nor do they promote a *behave well* response (24%), which was lower than the mean (26.3%) (Table 9).

Group Five – Contact with home

- (9) School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well
- (2) School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school

The highest response for *liking the teacher* (69%, mean 9.8%) is found where *parents are contacted for positive reasons*, and this is accompanied by high responses to *behave well* (42%, mean 26.3%) and to *work hard* (49%, mean 31.4%). In contrast, while the *work hard* response remains almost identical (47%), *contacting Year 11 parents to pass on negative remarks* is met by a much lower *behave well* response than *contacting parents with praise* (28%, mean 26.3%) and potential damage to the *relationship with the teacher* (Table 10).

Table 10. Group Five – contact with home (Year 11).

Question	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q9	2%	11%	28%	3%	11%	24%	38%	47%
Q11	69%	3%	42%	2%	2%	12%	2%	49%

Key findings relating to pupils working hard

- (1) *Negative feedback on work* is suggested as the greatest motivator for *working hard* for both Year 7 and Year 11 pupils, making feedback an important site for teacher focus in terms of the clarity of expectations.
- (2) *Being spoken to quietly* (as opposed to whole class or in front of class) ranks third for Year 7 and second for Year 11 in making pupils *work hard*.
- (3) *Stamps* (rewards) make a difference to the *popularity of the teacher*, but do not have a clear impact on *how hard Year 11 pupils will work*. This is not the case for Year 7 pupils, who respond more fully to this type of reward.
- (4) *Verbal warnings* are not as effective in promoting *hard work* as they are in encouraging pupils to *behave well*; they are not as effective in making Year 11 pupils *work hard* as they are at making Year 7 pupils *work hard*.

- (5) Any *contact with parents*, whether positive or negative, promotes *hard work* with both year groups.
- (6) For *working hard*, the least successful three approaches are the same for both year groups: *miss break*, *get detention*, *not allowed on school trip*.
- (7) For Year 11 pupils, *being told off in front of the class* appears to be more demotivating in relation to *working hard* than it is for Year 7 pupils.

Key findings relating to pupils behaving well

- (1) *Being spoken to quietly* (as opposed to whole class admonishments or individual admonishments in front of the class) rank fourth for both Year 7 and Year 11 pupils for *behaving well*.
- (2) *Stamps* make a difference to the *popularity of the teacher*, but do not have a big impact on *behaviour* for Year 11. *Stamps* make a bigger difference to *behaviour* for Year 7 pupils.
- (3) *Verbal warnings* and *contacting parents with positive feedback* are in top three for both year groups in relation to *behaving well*.
- (4) For *behaving well*, the least successful four are the same for both: *miss break*, *bad comments on work*, *no school trip*, *low marks*.
- (5) For Year 11 pupils, *being told off in front of the class* leads to a greater deterioration in *behaviour* than it does for Year 7 pupils.
- (6) Only *positive feedback to parents* promotes *good behaviour*.

Discussion

The school in this study has an exceptional reputation for good pupil behaviour and there is no doubt this is reflected here. The headteacher has a personal interest in classroom behaviour management and is particularly well-informed and committed to its success. As a result of this, leadership is extremely strong and the ethos of the behaviour policy is fully understood and very powerful; this has taken time to achieve.

The pupils who attend this school are aware of its approach to behaviour, and it is likely that parents and carers select this school because of its reputation in this area. It is also possible that the pupils in this particular school might be inclined to *work hard* and *behave well* at all times, just as some pupils might *like* or *dislike* all their teachers. Pupils in Year 7 selected a greater number of response options for each question than pupils in Year 11, and Year 7 pupils were generally less prepared to declare that they do not *work hard* or that they do not *behave well*. It is feasible that the younger pupils were in some way concerned about anonymity, or that they regarded the questionnaire as a test of their knowledge of the school's policy. The Year 11 pupils showed a slightly greater willingness to admit they would *switch off completely*, but the finding was not significant overall.

Pupils appear to take criticism of their work as just and reasonable; they respond well, by *working hard*. Criticism of their behaviour is not the same thing, and there is a clear indication here of what pupils regard as fair. Group Three questions, which are the only questions that relate solely to task-based work, show not only an

increase in *working hard* but also no accompanying rise in *dislike teacher*. There is a clear message from Year 7 pupils that they make a distinction between *working hard* and *behaving well*, because responses for *behave well* are at their lowest in the Group Three questions, perhaps indicating that they accept responsibility for their own classroom work; pupils are not showing any inclination to give up. For Year 11 pupils, their focus on their school work seems to have matured even further, but it should be noted that external examination grades, which are possibly at the forefront of Year 11 minds, are extrinsic motivators in their own right.

The asymmetry within classroom systems of rewards and sanctions is most apparent in the questions in Group Three, because there is no mechanism for imposing sanctions on pupils for not *working hard*. Pupils who do not get on with class work are either overlooked, or else they are penalised for behaviour. The idea of *low marks* and *poor school reports* is apparently not perceived by pupils as unreasonable criticism: it is perhaps somehow less personal. Most importantly, though, the fact there is no mechanism for sanctioning poor task-based performance means that it is only pupils' behaviour that is criticised, making the behaviour policy itself a mechanism for controlling behaviour, rather than for improving learning. Behaviour policies that are intended to improve learning environments can become conduits for criticism of pupils' behaviour.

The specific rewards and sanctions that are found in the school behaviour policy lead to a mixed range of responses from pupils. *Stamps* (rewards) are valued across both year groups, where one might reasonably expect older pupils not to be motivated by this kind of reward. Interestingly, for Year 11 pupils this leads more to *behaving well*, than to *working hard*, perhaps suggesting that the older pupils regard the *stamp* system as being related to behaviour rather than task. However, *verbal warnings* and *detentions* (sanctions) do not appear to promote *hard work*, but they do lead to *stay quiet* responses in both year groups. The *school trip* (an incentive) is valued by both year groups and pupils are clearly not at all happy to be told they are not able to attend.

The additional sanctions found in the Group Four questions continue to show that responses to sanctions are less beneficial than responses to incentives or rewards. Being made to *miss break* prompts unproductive responses from both Year 7 and Year 11 pupils and could be regarded as a strategy that has no benefit at all to pupil performance; *missing break* also appears to do considerable damage to the teacher–pupil relationship. *Whole class admonishments* are almost certainly unpopular because of perceptions of a lack of fairness. Interestingly, *being put on report*, where pupils have task-based goals set for each lesson, leads pupils to *work hard*, once again perhaps highlighting the difference in pupils' responses to perceived criticism of their work and perceived criticism of their behaviour.

It has been noted that *negative feedback* on task-based work (Group Three) does not lead to raised levels of *stay quiet* responses, but responses to questions in Group One show that both Year 7 and Year 11 pupils respond negatively to being *told off in front of the class*; they respond in part by *staying quiet*. For Year 7 pupils being *told off in front of the class* (Q1) shows the highest number of *stay quiet* responses across all 18 questions. For Year 11 pupils who are *told off in front of the class* the *stay quiet* response is the second highest, beaten only by their *stay quiet* response for receiving a *verbal warning*. The more formal sanction of a *verbal warning* (Group Two, Q2) provokes high *stay quiet* responses from both year groups. These findings suggest that some strategies from the behaviour policy, which is intended to

improve learning environments, has the potential to cause pupils to engage less in (constructivist) learning activities that might require pupils to discuss tasks.

Conclusion

The core findings from this pilot study reflect an understandably complex picture of human responses to rewards, incentives, punishments, teacher relationships and pupil maturation; there is much work to be done in this area, and the wholesale adoption of systems of rewards and sanctions in UK schools deserves to be unpacked and scrutinised. Much deeper understanding is needed here in terms of the distinction between rewards and sanctions that aim to affect pupils' social behaviour and those that are intended to affect their approach to classroom work. Perhaps more importantly, teachers and those responsible for teacher training, will benefit from a deeper appreciation of the complex nature of pupils' responses to rewards and sanctions. Common sense ideas, such as asking pupils to stay in at break to complete work, have the potential to lead to negative responses from pupils in relation to both their behaviour and their task-based work. By way of contrast, the incentive of a school trip is extremely effective in this school.

The single most successful strategy across behaviour and work and across pupils in Year 7 and Year 11 is contacting home with positive feedback. Not only does it promote good behaviour and hard work, but it is also beneficial to the teacher–pupil relationship.

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Appendix 1. Findings for Year 7

Year 7 – 240 replies	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q1 I was told off in front of the class	3%	7%	45%	4%	11%	52%	35%	39%
Q2 I was given verbal warning	2%	5%	49%	8%	4%	49%	13%	31%
Q3 I was told off in private	10%	4%	42%	3%	8%	42%	20%	35%
Q4 I got low marks	3%	2%	22%	4%	6%	22%	5%	81%
Q5 I got bad comments on my work	2%	8%	27%	4%	8%	26%	33%	52%
Q6 I got detention	0%	9%	45%	8%	17%	36%	39%	23%
Q7 I got lots of stamps	83%	1%	43%	2%	0%	11%	2%	42%
Q8 I was not allowed on school trip	2%	18%	30%	16%	22%	23%	53%	20%
Q9 School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well	2%	5%	39%	8%	11%	28%	40%	51%
Q10 My whole class got told off	3%	6%	45%	10%	9%	47%	31%	29%
Q11 School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school	73%	0%	48%	2%	2%	15%	2%	49%
Q12 I got a bad school report	1%	8%	45%	6%	12%	25%	33%	56%
Q13 I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate	13%	3%	46%	5%	7%	37%	15%	55%
Q14 I was given extra work to do	7%	12%	20%	8%	9%	20%	46%	48%
Q15 I was made to sit at front	4%	10%	38%	9%	13%	36%	39%	28%
Q16 I was sent out of class	3%	10%	38%	13%	17%	34%	50%	24%
Q17 I was made to miss break	1%	9%	34%	11%	15%	29%	56%	23%
Q18 I was put on report	3%	5%	49%	7%	15%	32%	41%	38%

Appendix 2. Findings for Year 11

Year 11 – 186 replies	Like teacher	Do less work	Behave well	Mess about	Switch off	Stay quiet	Dislike teacher	Work hard
Q1 I was told off in front of the class	1%	23%	23%	10%	20%	45%	46%	14%
Q2 I was given verbal warning	2%	8%	37%	4%	6%	53%	13%	20%
Q3 I was told off in private	16%	5%	46%	3%	6%	32%	19%	26%
Q4 I got low marks	1%	5%	22%	4%	6%	40%	8%	83%
Q5 I got bad comments on my work	1%	12%	13%	5%	6%	9%	24%	55%
Q6 I got detention	1%	11%	33%	9%	14%	26%	39%	14%
Q7 I got lots of stamps	60%	2%	30%	2%	2%	13%	3%	18%
Q8 I was not allowed on school trip	1%	21%	15%	25%	21%	11%	53%	12%
Q9 School contacted my parents to say I'm not doing well	2%	11%	28%	3%	11%	24%	38%	47%
Q10 My whole class got told off	1%	6%	24%	10%	12%	42%	23%	14%
Q11 School contacted my parents to say I'm doing really well in school	69%	3%	42%	2%	2%	12%	2%	49%
Q12 I got a bad school report	1%	4%	33%	3%	10%	20%	30%	48%
Q13 I was spoken to quietly in class by teacher and asked to concentrate	13%	3%	37%	3%	3%	34%	8%	55%
Q14 I was given extra work to do	5%	10%	11%	4%	9%	15%	27%	47%
Q15 I was made to sit at front	2%	23%	20%	13%	19%	33%	45%	13%
Q16 I was sent out of class	1%	22%	16%	12%	22%	33%	51%	8%
Q17 I was made to miss break	0%	21%	10%	19%	23%	22%	70%	8%
Q18 I was put on report	1%	8%	32%	9%	13%	23%	50%	32%