

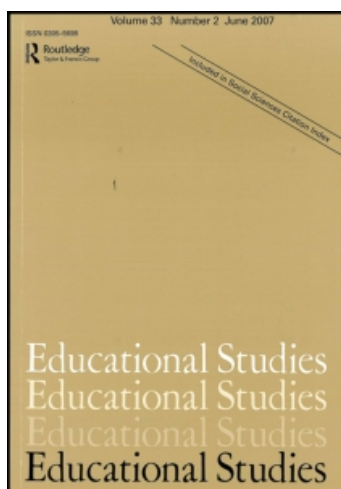
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Peter Sharpe ^a; Kevin Wheldall ^b; Frank Merrett ^b

^a Victoria College, Melbourne, Australia ^b Centre for Child Study, Faculty of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom

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RESEARCH NOTE

The Attitudes of British Secondary School Pupils to Praise and Reward

PETER SHARPE,¹ KEVIN WHELDALL² & FRANK MERRETT²

¹*Victoria College, Melbourne, Australia;* ²*Centre for Child Study, Faculty of Education, University of Birmingham, PO Box 363, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom*

Introduction

A common criticism of behavioural approaches to classroom management based on praise and reward is that whilst they may be shown to be effective with younger children they are less likely to work with secondary aged pupils. Specialisation, common in secondary schools, may cause problems of continuity, whilst fewer effective rewards are available in the secondary school, so the argument runs. Teacher praise to secondary pupils is seen as not only ineffective but even as counter-productive (Warshaw, 1975). This latter view is particularly pervasive, Ward (1976) being frequently cited in support: "praise delivered contingently by a teacher to an adolescent as simple inter-personal communication is reinforcing: in the presence of a peer group it can be highly punishing" (p. 262).

It is undoubtedly true that there are fewer published reports of successful behavioural interventions carried out in secondary schools compared with the primary sector (Merrett, 1981; Wheldall & Austin, 1980) but an increasing number are being reported (Wheldall & Merrett, 1985; McNamara, 1984). Apart from noting the effectiveness of praise and rewards in such studies, there is little available evidence in the behavioural literature, however, of how secondary pupils generally react to or regard the use of rewards and teacher praise. (See, however, Highfield & Pinsent's survey for NFER in 1952, subsequently replicated by Burns in 1978, which we will consider further in the Discussion section.) One exception to this is a study carried out by Sharpe (1985) in Australia in 1981 which sought to determine the attitudes of 251 secondary school students by means of a questionnaire. In brief, Sharpe found that his sample favoured external rewards for academic work (with strong preference for extra privileges), whilst regarding such rewards for social behaviour (e.g. 'being on-task') as inappropriate. The vast majority indicated that they valued teacher opinion over their friends' opinion regarding both academic work and conduct but this was accompanied by a strong preference for private praise from teachers compared with public praise or no praise. In general, his results question the misgivings about the appropriateness of behavioural reward strategies

in secondary classroom management but point up the need for sensitivity by teachers when rewarding or praising adolescents.

The aim of the present study was to survey attitudes to similar questions from a larger sample of British secondary pupils since such information would be of great value to teachers and other educationists planning behavioural interventions in British secondary schools. A second aim was to identify possible changes in attitude with age and sex.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of an incidental sample of 396 pupils (aged 12–16 years) from two comprehensive secondary schools in the West Midlands. One school was situated in a suburban residential area whilst the second was an inner ring school. Both schools, however, received pupils from a variety of backgrounds, with a large proportion coming from Asian and Afro-Caribbean homes. At least three, and usually four, different classes from each school year were sampled from the two schools. The sample, broken down by age and sex, is shown in Table I.

TABLE I. Distribution of subjects by age and sex

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Boys	51	55	34	40	32	212
Girls	29	45	33	47	30	184
All	80	100	67	87	62	396

Praise and Rewards Attitude Questionnaire (PRAQ)

The 'Praise and Rewards Attitude Questionnaire' (PRAQ) was administered to each class separately, the experimenters taking the class through the items, one by one. This was done to ensure that pupils of all ages (and especially poor readers) knew exactly what they had to do. Typically, administration of the questionnaire took about ten minutes and pupils appeared to experience no difficulties. PRAQ, reproduced in full as an Appendix, was based on Sharpe's earlier shorter questionnaire and was specially designed by the authors for this project. PRAQ may, however, be of more general use for teachers and educationists in determining the type and style of rewards and praise to employ with specific classes or individual children.

Briefly, PRAQ comprises four questions on pupils' attitudes to praise and rewards for academic work whilst four parallel questions focus on praise and rewards for good conduct. A final question asks students whether they think that they receive sufficient praise.

Results

The responses from the 396 pupils to PRAQ were tabulated for each of the questions 2 to 10 and are presented in Tables II to IX. (As already noted, Table I presents the breakdown of the sample by age and sex.) Note that all of the results presented here refer to expressed attitudes in response to the questionnaire and hence do not necessarily reflect behaviour i.e. how they would actually react in real life situations.

Table II shows that the majority would prefer to be rewarded for academic work 'sometimes' in preference to 'always' or 'never', although 'never' is increasingly chosen as children grow older (by year 4) and is preferred by almost half of the fifth years. In general, girls opt for 'sometimes' more than boys with the exception of year five.

Table III summarises the responses to the parallel question relating to social behaviour which shows that reward is still preferred 'always' or 'sometimes' by the majority but that preferences for 'never' are higher to start with and that this increases rapidly with age (22% to 66%).

TABLE II. Summary of answers to question 2. Do you think that you should be rewarded (with free time, or sweets or extra privileges) for doing your work (such as completing worksheets or handing in homework or getting high marks)?

	Year																	
	1			2			3			4			5			Totals		
	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N
Boys	10	33	8	6	47	2	10	20	4	6	22	12	3	16	13	35	138	39
%	20	65	15	11	85	4	29	59	12	15	55	30	9	50	41	17	65	18
Girls	3	26	0	3	41	1	2	30	1	4	32	11	0	13	17	12	142	30
%	10	90	0	7	91	2	6	91	3	9	68	23	0	43	57	7	77	16
Totals	13	59	8	9	88	3	12	50	5	10	54	23	3	29	30	47	280	69
%	16	74	10	9	80	3	18	75	7	11	62	26	5	47	48	12	71	17

A=All the time; S=Sometimes; N=Never.

Table III summarises the responses to the parallel question relating to social behaviour which shows that reward is still preferred 'always' or 'sometimes' by the majority but that preferences for 'never' are higher to start with and that this increases rapidly with age (22% to 66%).

The results for questions 4 and 5, relating to preferences for types of reward for academic and social behaviour respectively, are shown in Tables IV and V. Percentage preferences for the six forms of reward are based on the number of first and second choices made for each alternative. The results for boys and girls and for academic as against social behaviour are similar. 'Sweets or small gifts' are favoured by the younger pupils but this rapidly declines from the third year onwards with very few of the fifth years expressing a preference for them. 'No reward' is acceptable to very few first and second years but is slightly more acceptable to older

TABLE III. Summary of answers to question 3. Do you think that you should be rewarded (with free time or sweets or extra privileges) for being well behaved in school (staying in your seat, not talking out of turn, attending to the teacher)?

	1			2			3			4			5			Totals		
	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N	A	S	N
Boys	3	33	15	8	28	19	12	8	14	6	15	19	2	12	18	31	96	85
%	6	65	29	15	51	34	35	24	41	15	38	47	6	38	56	15	45	40
Girls	3	23	3	3	22	20	9	13	11	3	25	19	4	3	23	22	86	76
%	10	80	10	7	49	44	27	39	33	6	53	40	13	10	77	12	47	41
Totals	6	56	18	11	50	39	21	21	25	9	40	38	6	15	41	53	182	161
%	8	70	22	11	50	39	31	31	37	10	46	44	10	24	66	13	46	41

A=All the time; S=Sometimes; N=Never.

TABLE IV. Percentage preference for the six alternative rewards for academic work based on first and second choices only

	Year									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Sweets	25	22	20	19	26	15	16	8	6	2
Free time	25	31	30	21	34	29	36	30	34	28
No reward	4	2	2	1	6	6	7	11	11	16
Praise	7	2	7	10	1	11	8	7	6	17
Points	16	21	18	18	15	15	4	20	11	14
Letter	23	22	24	31	18	24	30	24	31	24

TABLE V. Percentage preference for the six alternative rewards for social behaviour based on the first and second choices only

	Year									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Sweets	26	24	23	11	28	14	14	4	5	4
Free time	26	33	25	16	35	32	36	27	30	30
No reward	6	3	3	7	6	8	11	11	13	18
Praise	10	3	9	16	1	6	16	13	9	14
Points	16	19	16	20	15	17	4	20	11	14
Letter	16	17	24	31	15	24	18	25	33	20

TABLE VI. Summary of answers to question 6. When you do something well in school such as answering a question or getting a piece of work correct, do you prefer the teacher to:

L=Praise you loudly, so that everyone can hear?

Q=Praise you quietly so that only you hear it?

N=Say nothing at all?

	Year																	
	1			2			3			4			5			Totals		
	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N
Boys	25	13	13	19	31	5	8	20	6	9	19	12	5	12	15	66	95	51
%	49	26	26	35	56	9	24	59	18	23	48	30	16	38	47	31	45	24
Girls	13	13	3	15	23	7	8	22	3	8	23	16	4	14	12	48	95	41
%	45	45	10	33	51	16	24	67	9	17	49	34	13	47	40	26	52	22
Totals	38	26	16	34	54	12	16	42	9	17	42	28	9	26	27	114	190	92
%	48	33	20	34	54	12	24	63	13	20	48	32	15	42	44	29	48	23

TABLE VII. Summary of answers to question 7. When you are well behaved in school such as getting on with your work quietly, or paying attention to the teacher, do you prefer the teacher to:

L=Praise you loudly, so that everyone can hear?

Q=Praise you quietly so that only you hear it?

N=Say nothing at all?

	Year																	
	1			2			3			4			5			Totals		
	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N	L	Q	N
Boys	17	23	11	12	27	16	5	21	8	2	18	20	4	8	20	40	97	75
%	33	45	22	22	49	29	15	62	24	5	45	50	13	25	63	19	46	35
Girls	13	12	4	12	19	14	7	17	9	7	15	25	4	10	16	43	73	68
%	45	41	14	27	42	31	21	52	27	15	32	53	13	33	53	23	40	37
Totals	30	35	15	24	46	30	12	38	17	9	33	45	8	18	36	83	170	143
%	38	44	19	24	46	30	18	57	25	10	38	52	13	29	58	21	43	36

pupils. Neither 'praise' nor 'house-points' were very highly rated at any age. A 'letter home' and 'free time' were the most favoured options and this was consistent over age, with 'free time' the more desirable of the two.

Tables VI and VII, reporting results for questions 6 and 7, refer to pupils' preferences for type of praise for academic and social behaviour respectively. For boys and girls and for both academic and social behaviour public (loud) praise is favoured most by the first years but declines rapidly with age. For academic behaviour 'no praise' is not considered desirable, on the whole, until years four and five when it is preferred by 30-45%. For social behaviour, however, 'no praise' is preferred by a larger minority in the early years and this rises to 50% and over in years four and five. In general, praise is more likely to be rejected for behaviour

TABLE VIII. Summary of answers to questions to 8 and 9. Percentages of pupils valuing the opinion of their teachers more than that of their peers for academic work and social behaviour

Year	With regard to academic work		With regard to social behaviour	
	B	G	B	G
1	92	97	86	97
2	92	96	80	96
3	82	94	78	91
4	88	96	80	89
5	84	100	81	89

than for academic work and private (quiet) praise is preferred to public (loud) praise.

Table VIII refers to whose opinion pupils value more regarding academic work and behaviour generally (questions 8 and 9). For both behaviours, both sexes and all ages pupils firmly express a preference for the teachers' opinions, all figures being over 77% for boys and 88% for girls.

Finally, the results for question 10 regarding the amount of praise that pupils receive are presented in Table IX. Very few children of either sex or any age feel that they receive 'too much' praise. In general, pupils say that the amount of praise they receive is 'about right' but this figure declines with age. In year five there is a pronounced sex difference with 41% of the boys claiming 'not enough' praise but 87% of the girls stating that it is 'about right'.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results from this survey show clearly, if this sample is in any way typical, that students in secondary schools perceive rewards and praise as appropriate outcomes

TABLE IX. Percentage responses to question 10 regarding the amount of praise received by pupils

	Year														
	1			2			3			4			5		
	T	N	R	T	N	R	T	N	R	T	N	R	T	N	R
Boys	4	8	92	0	35	65	0	30	70	0	23	77	0	41	59
Girls	3	7	90	4	36	60	3	36	61	0	28	72	0	13	87

T=Too much; N=Not enough; R=About right.

for their academic and social behaviours. This is in contrast to the generally accepted opinion about this issue (Warshaw, 1975). These secondary aged pupils generally regard rewards and praise as more appropriate for academic rather than for social behaviour, although younger students show a strong preference for rewards for both forms of response. Generally, these results are in line with those of Sharpe's (1985) Australian study although the pupils in his survey showed a more pronounced tendency to reject rewards for social responses than did the British pupils in this study.

The study also shows that easily administrable and suitable rewards are available in secondary schools. Free time and a positive letter home both receive strong support from both sexes and across age levels. Younger pupils also expressed a high preference for sweets and small gifts although this option may be judged as unsuitable in some contexts.

These results question the argument that secondary students do not value teacher praise and opinion. Although not rated as highly as free time or the positive letter home, teacher praise was strongly favoured over 'no reward' for all but the oldest pupils, particularly when it is a consequence of academic behaviour. The data also support earlier conclusions (Ward, 1976; Sharpe, 1985) that adolescents prefer private to public praise. Moreover, pupils of both sexes and at all age levels in this study showed an overwhelming preference for teachers' opinions over those of their friends, both for academic and social behaviour. Again, these results closely parallel Sharpe's Australian data and would lead us to question the belief that adolescents find peer approval more desirable. It must be emphasised, however, that teachers need to be sensitive to sex and age differences when giving praise and reward if these are to be effective.

The weakness of this type of data should not be overlooked. Pupils may be choosing from options, some of which they have not experienced and thus their choices are necessarily ill-informed. In any case, the data are merely expressed attitudes and may not be reflected in behaviour. On the basis of these data and Sharpe's Australian data, however, it may be concluded that teachers and educationists who reject the applicability of rewards and praise in secondary schools may be neglecting an important element in successful classroom management. Teachers may also find PRAQ useful as an instrument for tapping the opinions of their pupils to various forms of praise and reward.

Finally, we return to the work of Highfield & Pinsent for NFER (1952) and Burns (1978), briefly referred to in the Introduction. It is important to point out that the authors were unaware of this work until after the present data had been collected and analysed. Consequently, the close parallels between some of their findings and our own may be seen as independent replications, although the conclusions we draw differ somewhat from those of Burns. In brief, Burns' findings in 1978 mainly substantiate those of Pinsent & Highfield 26 years earlier. Burns found that secondary aged pupils of both sexes expressed the strongest preference for 'favourable report home' and also rated highly 'doing well in a test', 'good marks in a test' and being 'given a prize'. Their least favoured rewards included being singled out as a monitor/prefect or leader and private praise for boys and public

praise for girls. These findings contrasted markedly with those of the teachers in his sample who believed that public praise, election to leadership and good marks were the most effective rewards.

Burns interprets his findings as questioning some of the applications of 'learning theory'. For example,

Pupil loyalty at secondary school level is with the group; it is not with those in authority. So teacher praise and elections to authority roles need to be used judiciously. (p. 24)

We would certainly agree with the need for sensitivity but would point out that well over 80% of our sample claimed to value the opinion of their teachers over that of their peers for both academic and social behaviour. Similarly, he argues,

The belief in the general effectiveness of public praise probably stems from the considerable weight placed by certain learning theorists (derived in very different contexts) and stressed in teacher education courses, on the efficacy of positive reinforcement techniques which can unfortunately be applied in an inadequately understood and unthinking manner evoking unexpected results. Reinforcement needs to be recognised, accepted and interpreted as such by the person at whom it is directed. (p. 24)

Again, we would support the caution expressed above regarding the indiscriminate application of 'reinforcement' but would also add that reinforcers are operationally defined in terms of their effectiveness, which is not always congruent with expressed opinion. Students may not rate teacher praise as highly as, for example, free time but a letter home constitutes, in effect, a private form of praise delivered in a formal way. Moreover, experimental studies have repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of behavioural interventions in secondary schools which have been based on the use of praise (Wheldall & Merrett, 1985; McNamara, 1984). Praise may be seen as a desirable bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic control of pupil behaviour. By sensitive use of appropriate praise younger pupils may be made less dependent upon the need for more overt rewards. The results of our survey suggest that many older pupils are less dependent upon teacher praise but are still keen on free time and a letter home.

In conclusion, people of all ages respond to a range of internal and external reinforcers. Secondary school pupils are no exception and respond favourably to various forms of praise and reward which are available for use by the teacher. It is important, however, that teachers are sensitive to sex and age differences when giving praise or reward if these are to be fully effective.

Summary

A 'Praise and Rewards Attitude Questionnaire' (PRAQ) was administered to 396 secondary school pupils. Results showed that secondary pupils generally perceived praise and rewards as appropriate and desirable. Praise and rewards were regarded as being more appropriate for academic than for social behaviour by all students but

the older ones preferred praise to be given quietly and privately. Younger pupils showed a much stronger preference for tangible rewards (like sweets) than older pupils. Free time was seen as the most acceptable reward by almost all age groups and a positive letter home was also popular in comparison to house points, praise and tangible rewards. Generally, secondary pupils felt that their teachers' opinions about their work and behaviour were more relevant than those of their peers and most thought that the amount of praise they received was 'about right'.

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Appendix: Praise and Rewards Attitude Questionnaire

We are interested in your thoughts about rewards in schools. Please answer each question as honestly as you can. There is no need to write your name on the paper.

1. What form are you in?

Boy/Girl

2. Do you think that you should be rewarded (with free time, or sweets or extra privileges) for **doing your work** (such as completing worksheets or handing in homework or getting high marks)?

All the time

Tick one: Sometimes

Never

3. Do you think that you should be rewarded (with free time or sweets or extra privileges) for **being well behaved in school** (staying in your seat, not talking out of turn, attending to the teacher)?

All the time

Tick one: Sometimes

Never

4. If you were in a school that offered you rewards for **completing your work**, which would you choose? Rank the six categories below in **your** order of preference from 1 (most preferred) to 6 (least preferred).

Sweets or small gifts:

Free time to do what you choose:

No reward:

Praise from your teacher

House points, badges, certificates:

A letter to your parents praising you:

5. If you were in a school that offered you rewards for **being well behaved**, which would you choose? Rank the six categories below in **your** order of preference from 1 (most preferred) to 6 (least preferred).

Sweets or small gifts:

Free time to do what you choose:

No reward:

Praise from your teacher:

House points, badges, certificates:

A letter to your parents praising you:

6. When you do something well in school such as answering a question or getting a piece of work correct, do you prefer the teacher to:

Praise you loudly, so that everyone can hear?

Praise you quietly so that only you hear it?

Say nothing at all?

(Place a **tick** beside your choice)

7. When you are well behaved in school such as getting on with your work quietly, or paying attention to the teacher, do you prefer the teacher to:

Praise you loudly, so that everyone can hear?

Praise you quietly so that only you hear it?

Say nothing at all?

(Place a **tick** beside your choice)

8. Whose opinion do you value more, regarding your work in the classroom? In other words, who are you trying to please?

Teachers

Your friends

(Place a **tick** beside your choice)

9. Whose opinion do you value more, regarding your behaviour in class? In other words, who are you trying to please?

Teachers

Your friends

(Place a **tick** beside your choice)

10. On the whole, do you feel that the amount of praise you receive is:

Too much?

Not enough?

About right?

THANK YOU FOR HELPING US