Promoting behaviour for learning

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Aim of the project

The aim of this project was to find a more effective approach to managing behaviour than the school's existing structured system of 'consequences'. In particular, the research focused on how positive behaviour strategies could be used to improve students' behaviour for learning. This stemmed from my personal concern that whilst the system of 'consequences' was a helpful way of managing poor behaviour, there was little acknowledgement given to students who behaved well.

Dimensions of the study

This study took place in a large 11-18 co-educational comprehensive school, in Lancashire. Although I implemented a new system of positive behaviour strategies with students across the 11-18 age range, this study focused in particular on the behaviour of one mixed ability Year 8 class of students during my ICT lessons with them.

Summary of the main findings

- After introducing a new system of positive behaviour strategies alongside the existing system of 'consequences', incidents of poor behaviour decreased by 52%

- When asked, most students said they preferred the new reward system to the existing consequences approach

- When asked to explain why, the students said they were pleased when they received praise and rewards, but that they often felt 'wound up' and 'frustrated' when they received verbal reprimands and sanctions

Background and context

The focus of the study was how positive behaviour strategies could be used to improve classroom behaviour for learning. I read several summaries of research to gather ideas about effective approaches to use.

I identified my focus after a review of behaviour management in the school, which recognised that although poor behaviour was managed effectively, the use of praise and rewards was inconsistent across classes. I evaluated my own teaching practice, and consequently planned a structured approach to positive behaviour strategies. These consisted largely of a hierarchy of 'commendations'.

I made a record of the number of commendations and consequences given to the students in one Year 8 class before and after implementing the new strategies. I also surveyed the students for their views of the new approach. With issues of data protection, and confidentiality in mind, I amassed all data anonymously and discreetly.

Teaching processes and strategies

The school's existing behaviour policy consisted of a hierarchy of four consequences:

- verbal reprimands (e.g. for failing to follow basic classroom rules regarding chewing etc, inappropriate language and disrupting lessons by noise making and seeking attention)

- the student was referred to the tutor

- school detention (e.g. for offensive language and unacceptable behaviour on three occasions in a lesson)

- a senior manager removed the student from the classroom and discussed details of what had happened. Following receipt of a written account of the incident from the class teacher, a review was arranged with the student's parent/carer

Although the consequences system worked well, I felt that it was important to acknowledge positive behaviour too. I looked at several summaries of research on the GTC website for examples of evidence based strategies. One study showed how teachers who were successful at managing their students' behaviour did so through showing their appreciation of their students' positive behaviour. The study showed how these effective teachers used approaches that:

- directed most praise to individual students, rather than to the class as a whole;

- demonstrated a high level of acceptance of the students' own ideas and suggestions; and

- paid little attention to minor distractions within the lesson.

Essentially, the effective teachers set out to motivate their students to achieve more by giving them praise and formative feedback and by building positive relationships with them.

A review of studies involving primary aged pupils was useful because it showed several different ways of promoting positive behaviour. These included:

- providing rewards for on-task behaviour (e.g. ten minutes of free talking or listening to music);

- using visual aids, such as graphs or symbols (e.g. ticks on a chart, stickers in planners) to show pupils how they were progressing towards receiving a reward; and

- training pupils to behave through using cue cards as prompts for appropriate behaviour – for example, 'I need to remember to listen' or 'I must put my hand up and not shout out the answer'.

Looking at a study where the students had been consulted about their views of reward systems made me realise that students of different ages might prefer different kinds of rewards. The study found that secondary students found receiving public awards (e.g. merit badges in assembly) embarrassing and demeaning. They preferred less public methods, such as letters of congratulation sent to their parents and positive comments on their work and in their yearly reports.

I used the research evidence to help me plan my own new rewards system which would focus attention on positive behaviour. I devised a hierarchy of four kinds of meaningful rewards:

verbal (oral) praise for

- neat and tidy uniform

- raising a hand to ask/answer a question

- using good manners

- producing work of a good standard

- following instructions first time

- asking sensible/good questions

- offering answers to a whole-class question

- requesting further support/clarification to complete an activity

commendations/merits (suitable for use at KS3 and discreetly at KS4) for

- producing classwork/homework of a particularly good standard

- working effectively in a team

- showing significant improvements to behaviour

- demonstrating consistently good behaviour

head teacher's awards (suitable for use across KS3 and KS4)

- consistently producing classwork/homework of a particularly good standard

- producing work that exceeds expected standard/target

- achieving significant long-term improvements to behaviour

postcards home (suitable for use across KS3 and particularly at KS4)

- producing work that exceeds expected standard on a number of occasions

- achieving/exceeding target level at end of unit of assessment

- making significant improvements to behaviour

At the same time, I avoided relying on the consequences system (designed to manage poor behaviour) by adopting a more positive approach. I planned to overlook and tactfully ignore isolated examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as:

- use of informal, non-offensive language between students

- calling out to give an answer to a question

- students demonstrating attention seeking behaviour, such as making unnecessary noises etc.

Instead of focusing on the behaviour, I aimed to distract individual students from poor behaviour by re-focusing the students on their work and reminding students of good behaviour choices, for example:

> "It looks like you've made a good start with this work, I can see that you're about to continue working on your storyboard – is there anything I can help you with?"
>
> "I need to speak to everyone now, so you will need to save your work, switch off your monitor and face this way … Well done Hannah, Rachel and Josh. Thank you for doing that so quickly. I want to talk to you about how we're progressing this lesson …"
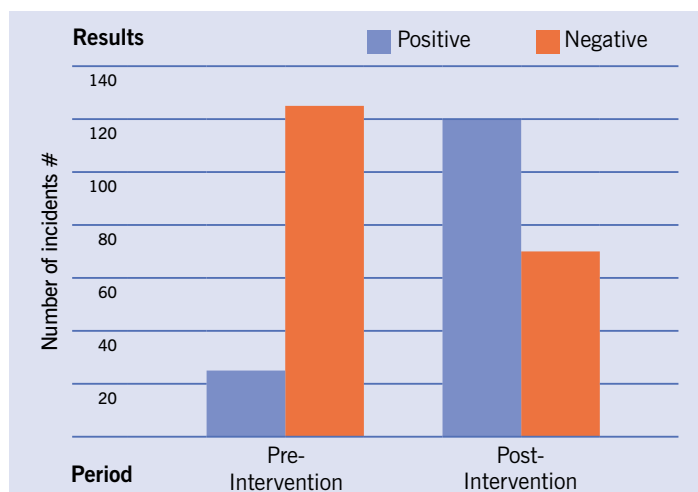>
> "Your work is really good James, and I noticed that you were helping Danny earlier. If you put your planner on my desk I'll make sure you get a commendation".

Initially, I also planned to use the cue-cards system I had read about with certain students. I put post-it notes on these students' desks reminding them of a target behaviour, for example,

> "In this session I want you to finish …' or 'remember to put a hand up to answer a question".

I quickly realised that it was important to not only select the worst behaved students. Over the course of the term, I made sure I gave every student in the class relevant 'post-it note targets', although I particularly targeted students who showed poor behaviour.

Results — Positive / Negative

Number of incidents # (y-axis: 20, 40, 60, 80, 100, 120, 140)

Period: Pre-Intervention, Post-Intervention

The findings

To monitor the impact of the new approach, I logged all the detentions and referrals for my Year 8 class for twenty days before the intervention. I then collected the same data again for twenty days with the new system of positive behaviour strategies in operation. The results showed an overall increase in the number of positive incidents and a decrease in the number of examples of poor behaviour.

When I asked the students about which kinds of actions they preferred (using a questionnaire), almost twice as many said they preferred commendations/merits to consequences. In particular, they liked to receive certificates with awards and to speak with their teacher about their work. The students said they were pleased when they received praise and rewards, but that they often felt 'wound up' and 'frustrated' when they received oral reprimands and sanctions. They felt that in the past whilst poor behaviour had always been tackled and dealt with very well, they had not always received the praise or reward for good behaviour they felt they had deserved.

Research methods

I searched the Internet for research evidence relevant to my area of enquiry. Reading the research summaries I found helped me to design a new approach to promoting positive behaviour for learning, which I trialled for one term. I recorded incidents of good and poor behaviour during one Year 8 class's ICT lessons (i.e. when students received consequences, such as detentions, or rewards) for 20 days before introducing the new approach and

for another 20 days after the new system was in place. Towards the end of the term, I gave all students in the class a short questionnaire to complete during lesson time about their views of the new approach.

Conclusion

It was clear from the research that a planned approach to behaviour management, with a strong focus on positive strategies was effective in promoting behaviour for learning. Obviously, there will always be some incidents that require the use of verbal reprimands and sanctions. The students' behaviour continued to improve after the period of the study and the number of incidents requiring verbal reprimands and sanctions continued to decrease. Behaviour patterns noticeably improved as students become more aware of their behaviour and the reaction of their teacher.

Suggestions for further reading

GTCE case study of this project:
www.gtce.org.uk/networks/engagehome/resources/behaviour_for_learning/case1

GTC Research of the Month summary, Effective strategies for primary school pupils with EBD:
www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_inclusion/behaviour_nov04/

GTC Research of the Month summary, Consulting pupils about teaching and learning:
www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_teachingandlearning/pupilvoice_jun05/

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