

Attitudes of African American and Caucasian eight grade students about praises, rewards, and...

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Article

\*STUDENTS -- Attitudes

\*REWARD (Psychology) in children

\*PUNISHMENT

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**Abstract:**

Investigates the attitudes of African and Caucasian American students towards praises, rewards, and punishments. Comparison of attitudes between races and genders; Race and gender as factor in students attitudes about reward and punishment; Students' attitudes modulated by cultural and biological factors.

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## **ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CAUCASIAN EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS ABOUT PRAISES, REWARDS, AND PUNISHMENTS**

Over the last few decades, many problems have surfaced related to teaching in United States schools, partially because of larger class sizes and increased student diversity. One problem that teachers face is an increase in the incidence of rebellious and disruptive behavior by students, which seems to indicate that previous ways of dealing with reward and punishment by teachers have not always been effective (Brophy & Good, 1974; Chance, 1992; Merrett, Wilkins, Houghton, & Wheldall, 1988; Parker, 1978; Smith, 1978). Teachers must learn to become expert managers in the classrooms if they are to optimize learning. As part of this process, teachers should make the effort to identify what children find effective as reward or punishment, and then to adapt the educational environment accordingly (Merrett & Tang, 1994; Pang, 1992).

The teacher sets the guidelines for the classroom's educational environment and is inevitably the person to decide the consequences of their students' performance and behavior. According to Merrett and Tang (1994), rewarding consequences (positive reinforcers) are those that follow a desired behavior and serve to increase its frequency. Conversely, punishing consequences follow an undesired behavior and serve to decrease its frequency. Neutral consequences are those that have no measurable effect on behavior. Teachers must recognize that the application of specific rewards or punishments should be reevaluated if such consequences are not effective in directing subsequent behavior, and that the effectiveness of such consequences hinges in part on the opinions of students concerning appropriate reward and punishment.

Pursuant to earlier studies of student attitudes about reward and punishment (Caffyn, 1989; Sharpe, Wheldall, & Merrett, 1987; Turco & Elliot, 1984), Merrett and Tang (1994) investigated nearly 1,800 British school students (boys and girls age 8-11) through the use of a written questionnaire (14 probes). The research involved two variables: age level and sex. The researchers found significant differences in the responses of students, according to age or sex, on some items.

To date, however, no published studies on the attitudes of students toward reward and punishment have investigated whether race is potentially a significant factor. In light of the absence of data involving race and student attitudes about these consequences, the main objectives of this study are as follows: (a) to compare the attitudes of African American and Caucasian students, (b) to compare the attitudes of boys

and girls, (c) to compare the attitudes of each sex within each racial group, and (d) to compare the attitudes of the British Caucasian students investigated by Merrett and Tang. It should be emphasized that the current investigation is substantially parallel to the study developed by Merrett and Tang (1994).

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

The final sample consisted of 1,689 U.S. eighth grade students age 12 to 14. The participants were from two independent public school districts, 9 schools, and 12 reading classes. The racial and gender breakdown of the participants was as follows: 928 Caucasians (526 girls and 402 boys), and 761 African Americans (418 girls and 343 boys). The population was drawn in equal proportions from three intellectual ability level groups (high, average, low) as determined by reading test scores on the CAT (California Achievement Test) and ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills). All participants had been placed by counselors in reading classes corresponding to their ability level. Thirty one of the participants were excluded from the final sample because they failed to provide complete information concerning age or sex on the written questionnaire.

### **Materials**

The investigation was conducted in the form of a written questionnaire. The questionnaire employed in this study (see Appendix) is generally parallel to the PRPR (Praise, Rewards, Punishments & Reprimands) attitude questionnaire recently modified by Merrett and Tang (1994) for elementary to middle school students. In the current study, however, several questions provided students with an additional choice (see Appendix). A test run was performed at a site school before the actual survey process was initiated. The survey process took three months to complete. Before students began filling out the survey, the teachers read out loud the entire questionnaire item by item. This helped ensure that any student questions about their task would be resolved beforehand. The questionnaire took participants approximately 17 minutes to complete.

## **RESULTS**

The results of this study measuring the attitudes of 1,689 U.S. eighth grade students toward reward and punishment are presented in four tables. The data were analyzed by means of chi-square analysis. By necessity, only significant findings are reported. Respondents were compared by race (African American and Caucasian) and sex (boys and girls). When comparing responses by sex, Caucasians and African Americans are combined as one group unless otherwise noted. Responses were also compared to the results (when reported in detail) of the British study by Merrett and Tang (1994).

Questions 1 and 2 asked students how frequently they should be rewarded for "good work" (Question 1) or "good behavior" (Question 2) in class. For Question 1 on "good work," the majority (56%) believed that they should be rewarded "sometimes"; these results are consistent with those of Merrett and Tang (1994). The results for this study's sample revealed significant differences by race, but not by sex. African Americans responded with "sometimes" in much greater numbers than did Caucasians (63% versus 50%); the differences ( $\chi^2 = 28.21$ ) were determined to be significant. The findings for responses by sex proved inconsistent with the research by Merrett and Tang, which found statistically significant differences for the age groups 10 and 11 and for girls selecting "sometimes" in higher numbers than boys.

For Question 2 on "good behavior," again the majority of students (57%) thought that they should be rewarded "sometimes." Here, preference by race proved not to be statistically significant. However, comparing results by sex, girls selected "sometimes" in greater numbers than boys (60% versus 53%); the differences ( $\chi^2 = 23.66$ ) were deemed significant. This difference is attributable to the Caucasian participants: more African American boys (60%) chose "sometimes" than did African American girls (54%), but far more Caucasian girls (67%) chose this answer than did Caucasian boys (46%). The findings for responses by sex again proved inconsistent with the research by Merrett and Tang (1994),

who here found no significant differences (See Table 1).

Questions 3 through 6 required the respondents to rank rewards or punishments based on first through sixth preferences. Question 3 and 4 asked students to rank choices for rewards for good work (Question 3) or good behavior (Question 4). For both questions, the highest percentage of students (43%) selected "Free time to do what you want" as their first choice, with no significant differences by race or sex. These findings are not consistent with those of Merrett and Tang (1994), who reported that "A letter to your parents," the third choice among U.S. students, was the most popular choice among British students. Questions 5 and 6 asked students to identify the most effective punishments for poor work (Question 5) or bad behavior (Question 6). For both questions, the highest percentage of students (29%) selected "A letter to your parents" as the most effective punishment. These findings are consistent with those of Merrett and Tang (1994).

Question 7 asked students what type of verbal acknowledgment (if any) they prefer for good work. The majority of students (56%) preferred that the teacher "loudly" (where the entire class can hear) praise them. These findings are not consistent with those of Merrett and Tang (1994), who reported quiet acknowledgment as the most popular choice (48%) overall. Responses in this study differed significantly ( $\chi^2 = 14.59$ ) by race: 65 % of African Americans, compared to only 46% of Caucasians, preferred to be praised "loudly." Comparing the responses by sex within races, African American boys (73%) strongly preferred this choice, and the differences between African American boys and Caucasian boys (45%) were significant ( $\chi^2 = 21.02$ ) (see Table 2).

Question 8 asked students what type of verbal acknowledgment (if any) they preferred for good behavior. Being acknowledged "loudly" was the most popular choice (42%) overall, and findings were not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.01$ ) by race. However, African Americans selected being praised "loudly" (47%) more than Caucasians (36%) did. Comparing the responses by sex and race, African American girls (48%) strongly preferred this choice (see Table 3).

Questions 9 and 10 asked students which punishment would make them improve on bad work (Question 9) or bad behavior (Question 10) in school. For Question 9 on bad work, the highest percentage of students (41%) chose being reprimanded "quietly," and results did not vary significant by race or sex. These findings are not consistent with those of Merrett and Tang (1994), who reported that a slight majority (51%) of British students indicated that being reprimanded "loudly" (scolding in the presence of the class) would be most effective.

For Question 10 on bad behavior, being reprimanded "loudly" was the top choice with students (42%), and results were not significant by race. However, by sex, the differences ( $\chi^2 = 63.48$ ) were significant. That is, 43% of girls preferred being reprimanded "quietly," compared with 30% of boys (see Table 3).

Question 11 and 12 asked students whom they would most like to please with "your work" (Question 11) and "your behavior" (Question 12) in the class. For Question 11 on classwork, results varied significantly ( $\chi^2 = 30.2$ ) by race. The majority of African Americans (71%) preferred to please their "teacher over "parents" or "friends," compared to the reverse proportion (30%) of Caucasians. Results by sex for girls were profoundly significant ( $\chi^2 = 152.38$ ). That is, 81% of African American girls, compared to only 28% of Caucasian girls, chose the "teacher" as the person they wanted most to please with their classwork.

For Question 12 on behavior, the differences ( $\chi^2 = 86.5$ ) proved to be significant by race. Among African Americans, 83% would rather please their "teacher" with their classroom behavior, compared to just 44% for Caucasians (see Table 4).

Questions 13 and 14 asked students whether the amount of praise (Question 13) and punishment (Question 14) they received was "Too much," "Too little," or "About right." For both questions, the results were not statistically significant by race or sex. Most students chose "About right": 56% for Question 13 on praise, 63% for Question 14 on punishment. These results are consistent with those of

Merrett and Tang (1994).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study affirm some of the earlier investigations of student attitudes toward reward and punishment. Both this study and that of Merrett and Tang (1994) found that most students thought they should be rewarded for academic work "sometimes" in preference to "always" or "never." Both studies found that students ranked "A letter to your parents" as the most effective punishment for bad behavior. Both studies also found that students considered the amount of reward and punishment they received to be "about right."

The results for this study, however, show that race as well as sex is sometimes a significant factor in student attitudes about reward and punishment. Generally, variances in results for the U.S. Caucasian students in this study and the British Caucasian students surveyed by Merrett and Tang (1994) suggested that student attitudes are modulated by a spectrum of cultural and biological factors. Additional studies are needed to explore these factors.

In this study, the most noticeable difference in attitudes related to Question 11, which asked who students most wished to please with their classwork. Overwhelmingly, African American students (71%) thought that pleasing the "teacher" was the greatest priority, while Caucasians (52%) chose the "parent." However, girls as a group (54%) chose the "teacher" as the person they would most like to please with their classwork, with African American girls (81%) choosing this response more than any other group of participants.

The current study could be viewed as having some limitations. For example, unlike the study by Caffyn (1989), students were not asked to submit their written comments to the questions. Had students supplied written answers, they could possibly have given valuable feedback into why certain responses were selected, especially with some responses of African Americans. Therefore, additional studies are needed that will elicit participants' written comments.

Along with teachers, administrators and school counselors should play a role in assessing which system of reward and punishment could optimize learning and secure order in the classroom (Elliot, Witt, Galvin, & Petterson, 1984; Witt, Elliot, & Martens, 1994). On an immediate level, the climate of a classroom is a product of the interacting performances of the teacher and students. Administrators and school counselors can improve that climate by helping teachers to recognize the students' current needs and learn how to encourage students through avenues they find rewarding (Chance, 1992). Moreover, as implied by the findings on contacting parents as a method of punishment, involving parents is very important to maximizing the effectiveness of the classroom.

## **TABLE 1. Summary of Answers to Questions 1 and 2**

Legend for Chart:

A - Item  
 B - Boys, A  
 C - Boys, S  
 D - Boys, N  
 E - Girls, A  
 F - Girls, S  
 G - Girls, N  
 H - Total, A  
 I - Total, S  
 J - Total, N

A            B            C            D            E            F            G            H            I            J

Question 1

African American

N	108	227	8	158	250	10	266	477	18
%	31	66	3	38	60	2	34	63	3

## Caucasian

N	156	202	44	207	259	60	363	461	104
%	39	50	11	40	49	11	39	50	11

## Total

N	264	429	52	365	509	70	629	938	122
%	35	58	7	39	55	6	37	56	7

## Question 2

## African American

N	132	206	5	180	227	11	312	433	16
%	38	60	2	43	54	3	41	57	2

## Caucasian

N	158	186	58	166	364	6	324	540	64
%	39	46	15	32	67	1	36	56	8

## Total

N	290	392	63	346	581	17	636	673	80
%	39	53	8	38	60	2	38	57	5

Note. A = all the time, S = sometimes, N = never. For complete question, see the Appendix.

**TABLE 2. Summary of Answers to Question 7**

Legend for Chart:

- A - Item
- B - Boys, L
- C - Boys, Q
- D - Boys, N
- E - Girls, L
- F - Girls, Q
- G - Girls, N
- H - Total, L
- I - Total, Q
- J - Total, N

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
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## Question 7

## African American

N	249	69	25	236	142	40	485	211	65
%	73	20	7	56	34	10	85	27	8

## Caucasian

N	180	136	86	246	173	107	432	309	193
%	45	34	21	47	33	20	46	33	20

## Total

N	439	205	111	482	315	147	917	520	285
%	59	27	14	51	34	15	56	30	14

Note. L = say loudly that you have done well, so that everyone can hear you; Q = say quietly, so that only you can hear, N = say nothing at all. For complete question, see the Appendix.

**TABLE 3. Summary of Answers to Questions 8 and 10**

Legend for Chart:

- A - Item
- B - Boys, L
- C - Boys, Q
- D - Boys, P
- E - Boys, N
- F - Girls, L
- G - Girls, Q
- H - Girls, P
- I - Girls, N
- J - Total, L
- K - Total, Q
- L - Total, P
- M - Total, N

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
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Question 8

African American

N	159	128	37	19	201	120	62	35	360	248	33	54
%	46	37	11	6	48	29	15	8	47	33	13	7

Caucasian

N	130	142	35	95	206	190	32	98	336	332	67	193
%	32	35	9	24	39	36	6	49	36	35	8	21

Total

N	280	270	72	114	407	310	94	133	696	580	166	247
%	39	36	10	15	44	33	10	13	42	34	10	14

Question 10

African American

N	51	120	115	57	75	175	153	15	126	595	568	72
%	15	35	33	17	18	42	37	3	17	38	35	7

Caucasian

N	85	94	138	85	65	225	121	116	150	318	259	72
%	21	24	34	21	12	43	6	22	17	34	28	21

Total

N	136	214	253	142	140	399	274	131	276	613	257	273
%	18	30	33	19	15	43	30	12	17	36	32	15

Note. L = say loudly that you have done well, so that everyone can hear you; Q = say quietly, so that

only you can hear; P = letter to your parents; N = say nothing at all. For complete question, see the Appendix.

**TABLE 4. Summary of Answers to Questions 11 and 12**

Legend for Chart:

A - Item  
 B - Boys, T  
 C - Boys, F  
 D - Boys, P  
 E - Girls, T  
 F - Girls, F  
 G - Girls, P  
 H - Total, T  
 I - Total, F  
 J - Total, P

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
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Question 11

African American

N	214	38	91	340	27	51	554	65	142
%	62	11	27	81	7	12	71	9	20

Caucasian

N	160	80	192	150	82	294	280	162	486
%	32	20	48	28	16	56	30	18	52

Total

N	344	448	501	490	109	345	834	227	628
%	47	16	37	54	19	34	51	14	35

Question 12

African American

N	285	21	37	342	10	66	627	31	103
%	38	60	2	43	54	3	41	57	2

Caucasian

N	184	70	148	228	62	236	412	132	384
%	46	17	37	43	12	45	44	15	41

Total

N	469	91	185	570	72	302	1039	163	487
%	65	12	27	63	7	30	64	9	27

Note. T = teachers, F = friends, P = parents, For complete question, see the Appendix.

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### **APPENDIX**

The following is a survey. Your honest answers will help teachers understand your thoughts and feelings and help everybody understand each other. Do not put your name on this paper. If you need help, please ask your teacher.

What is your age? Circle one: 11, 12, 13, 14.

Your Sex? Boy -- Girl

Race: African American -- White

1). Do you think that you should be rewarded for doing good work with free time to do what you want, or sweets or some other rewards? Choose ONLY one:

All the time

Sometimes

Never

2). Do you think that you should be rewarded for good behavior in school with free time to do what you want, or sweets or some other rewards?

Choose ONLY one:

All the time