

# **Teaching to Care: Abolishing Rewards and Punishments in the Inner-City School**

## **Executive Summary**

Raymond Lau, Brian Piccolo Specialty School  
2004-2005 MetLife Fellow  
Teachers Network Leadership Institute

### ***Research Question***

*What happens if I abolish all rewards and punishments in my classroom, and, instead, focus on teaching my students to pursue knowledge for its intrinsic rewards and to do the right thing for its own sake?*

### ***Rationale***

My school is located in a very violent neighborhood and there is an unusually high level of anger among the students. Trivial comments or small incidents often trigger temper tantrums and arguments that derail students' efforts to learn. To help students learn, I must create a caring and nurturing environment in my classroom. Classroom management techniques that rely on rewards and punishments undermine efforts to create such an environment—they generate tension and hostility rather than trust and care. Therefore, I must try to abolish all rewards and punishments in my classroom.

### ***Methodology***

The data for my research are: Teacher Journal entries; class meeting discussions; pre- and post-Student Motivation Surveys; and Student Journal entries.

### ***Data and Preliminary Analysis***

#### **A. Teacher Journal Entries—Narrative**

The first half of the school year was extremely challenging. Doing away with rewards was straightforward, but eliminating punishments was much more difficult. Typically, I would begin the day seeking students' cooperation by appealing to their sense of right and wrong, and things would usually go pretty well; right after lunch, however, students would get out of control and I would be forced to resume using threats and punishments. I routinely became so exhausted that I literally could not stand up to teach in the afternoons. More than once, I entertained the possibility of not coming back the following year.

The Winter Break restored my energy and enthusiasm. I had concluded that rewards and punishments were "necessary evils" that I must continue to use as stopgap measures. This resolution lifted a huge emotional burden off my shoulders. I began to invest more time and energy to building community in my room and engaging students in discussions of matters of right and wrong. I resumed holding regular class meetings in January and created a class council in March. Through these vehicles, students actively discussed problems that affected the whole class and collaborated to find solutions.

#### **B. Class Meetings**

My first class meeting in September was a waste of time—students were constantly playing and yelling at each other. As a result, I stopped. In January, I resumed holding regular class meetings. While it was still difficult to keep students focused, our discussions did gradually become more purposive and productive.

### C. Student Survey Results

The results of the pre- and post-Student Motivation Surveys show that students had conflicting feelings about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation factors. For example, while many more students cited intrinsic motivation factors for improvements in academic performance in the post- than in the pre-survey, the opposite is true for improvements in classroom behavior—many more students cited extrinsic motivation factors.

### D. Student Journals:

Student journal entries revealed that nearly all students were in favor of having class meetings and a class council because these vehicles allowed them to express their feelings about the classroom and to collaborate to make it better. But students were troubled by the disruptive and disrespectful behaviors of their classmates.

#### ***Further Analysis and Reflections***

- It may be too emotionally challenging to try to abolish all rewards and punishments in one stroke, especially in an inner-city school with long-standing discipline problems. Therefore, a transitional period to phase them out may be necessary.
- Rewards and punishments cannot be abolished in a vacuum; a strong sense of community and students' ability to make decisions of right and wrong must be in place beforehand.
- The tension and hostility engendered by the use of punishments did not destroy my relationship with my students only because I continuously bonded with my students.
- Attitudes and habits change slowly. Therefore, teachers toiling to promote social and moral development must have a strong determination and a clear vision to be able to withstand the inevitable uncertainty and stress.
- "We teach who we are." To be a role model for my students, I must first address the anger, impatience, and the sense of inadequacy that I struggled with.

#### ***Policy Change Recommendations***

- Policy-makers should include the social, emotional, and moral development of children in their discussion and measurement of student growth.
- Organizations interested in promoting Character Education should educate teachers and administrators on classroom management methods that do not rely on rewards and punishments.
- Principals should minimize the use of rewards and punishments in their schools and urge their teachers to do the same.
- Teachers should build classroom community and engage students in moral discussions; for example, by holding regular class meetings and creating class councils.

#### ***New Questions for Further Research***

- Are rewards and punishments only necessary during a transitional period, or are they permanent "necessary evils"? How long does it take to phase them out?
- What long-term impact do class meetings and class councils have on classroom community and students' ability to make decisions of right and wrong?
- How might students play a more active role in determining the best approaches to eliminating rewards and punishments?