

Teaching to Care

Abolishing Rewards and
Punishments in
the Inner-City School

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“Mr. Lau, will you love us no matter what?”
One of my fifth-graders
October 2004

One afternoon, less than two months into the school year, my class was getting out of control coming back from lunch. No matter how I pleaded, demanded, or threatened, my students refused to settle down and give me their attention. I lost my temper and yelled at them that this was the worst class I had ever had. Suddenly, Wendy, one of the loudest girls, blurted out, “Mr. Lau, will you love us no matter what?” I was taken aback and did not know how to respond. I was unwilling to say yes—that I would love them no matter what—because that would be untrue; and yet I did not want to say no and hurt my students’ feelings. To get out of this predicament, I mumbled that if I were to leave the school one day, it would not be on account of the students. While I succeeded in fooling my students with my roundabout response, I failed to fool myself; I was stumped. Wendy’s question haunted me for the rest of the year. My action research project was largely my attempt to come to terms with this nagging question, both for myself and for my students.

School Context

“Are you coming back next year?”
Many teachers at my school

I had just joined a school on the far west side of Chicago as a fifth-grade general education teacher. The school is located in one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city. It has undergone drastic demographic shifts in the last thirty years or so—from predominantly White to Hispanic, and then recently to African American. My school was built in 1918 and has over a thousand students attending pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Ninety-four percent of the students are low-income, based on their free or reduced lunch status. The

current student body is roughly 77% African American, 20% Hispanic, and 3% White. 11% of the students are English Language Learners. The student mobility rate is 31%, and the graduation rate is 79%.

According to results of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, my school has one of the lowest academic achievement levels in the city—less than 20% of our students meet or exceed state grade-level learning goals. As a result, it has been on academic probation for nine years. Every aspect of school administration and classroom instruction is scrutinized closely by multiple layers of bureaucracy, resulting in a tremendous amount of additional paperwork and anxiety for everyone.

The tone and quality of daily life at the school are extremely upsetting and stressful. There are daily fights among students, sometimes quite serious. Vandalism is rampant; for example, displays on my hallway bulletin boards are regularly torn down. Students, inside and outside of classrooms, are routinely disrespectful and defiant, sometimes cursing blatantly at teachers and administrators. The tension is palpable. Not surprisingly, the school's biggest challenge is to recruit and retain a stable core of high-quality teachers. In fact, even most substitute teachers refuse to be assigned to my school. As a result, the specials (art, computer, gym) and special education teachers are regularly called upon at the last minute to "sub" in classrooms whose teachers are absent, thus causing a domino effect of students losing their specials classes, special education students losing their special education services, and teachers losing their preparatory periods. All parties concerned predictably end up being upset. I have had several weeks without a single prep period. Morale among the staff is extremely low. Most teachers will not attend meetings before or after school unless paid extra. A frequently-heard question at the end of each school year is: "Are you coming back next year?"

Rationale

“Antwon, you’ve got detention.”

“So?”

“So, you’ve got detention.”

“I don’t care!”

Exchange between me and a student

An “I-Don’t-Care” attitude pervades my school. For students, this attitude often translates into a reckless disrespect for self, others, property, academics, and sometimes even life. It is this “I-Don’t-Care” attitude that is holding back students’ academic achievement, not their intelligence. Most students come to school with so much emotional, social and psychological “baggage” that, unless we can enable or help them to resolve these issues, all our efforts to help them improve academically will not amount to much.

There is also an extremely high level of anger and violence among the students. As they grow up amidst so much violence—gang- and drug-related, or domestic—their lives are unavoidably affected in fundamental and pervasive ways. Trivial comments or small incidents often trigger temper tantrums and derail students’ efforts to learn. Even more damaging, students regularly lash out violently over what appears to me to be minor conflicts; perhaps this is their way of reacting to their lack of control over their lives. Tragically, there is a dearth of peaceful, constructive examples of conflict resolution. As a result, it is a challenge for students to channel or resolve their anger and destructive emotions in productive ways.

In order to make a difference in my students’ lives and help them learn better, I must create a caring, safe, and nurturing environment in my classroom. However, as each year passes, I realize more and more that the classroom management techniques that I have taken for granted undermine, rather than strengthen, the environment I work so hard to create. These techniques rely exclusively on using rewards and punishments as positive and negative reinforcements for

students' behaviors. However, amidst the angry "I-Don't-Care" climate of my school, rewards and punishments, more often than not, accomplish the exact opposite of what I intend. For example, every time I single individual students out to receive "Student-of-the-Week" awards or attend "Incentive Fridays," after-school parties to reward good behavior during the week, I inevitably end up hurting other children's feelings. At the same time, punishments, instead of serving as deterrents, provoke many students into terrible temper tantrums, thereby making bad situations worse. As a result of these unintended consequences, tension and hostility, rather than trust and care, prevail in the classroom.

Tragically, for many years, I adamantly continued to rely on rewards and punishments to maintain order and control in the classroom. Even though it was always the same students who received the same rewards and punishments, I kept believing that it was simply a matter of finding the right mix of rewards and punishments. In spite of the occasional doubts and nagging sense of unease, I never questioned my search for the "Holy Grail" of that magical mix of rewards and punishments that would summon the "perfect" classroom I so desired.

Wendy's question at the beginning of the school year—"Mr. Lau, will you love us no matter what?"—woke me up. For the first time, I understood clearly that, in order to break the vicious cycle of anger that plagues my school, and other schools like it, I must shift paradigms. In order for me to win, not just the minds, but also the hearts, of my students, I must send a clear message to them through my teaching and the daily interactions and rituals in the classroom, that I can, and do, care for them all as individual children, no matter what challenges their academic work or behavior might hold. In order to do so, I must overcome the sense of tension and hostility in my classroom generated by my use of rewards and punishments. Therefore, I wonder: what happens if I stop using rewards and punishments in my classroom and, instead, encourage

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students to do academic work for its intrinsic interest and do the right thing for its own sake?

Research Question

The central question of my action research project is:

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?

Based on this central question, I developed the following subquestions:

- *If I abolish all punishments in my classroom, will my students' behavior deteriorate?*
- *If I abolish all extrinsic rewards, will my students continue to be motivated to improve, academically and behaviorally?*
- *Are there circumstances under which extrinsic rewards or punishments may be justified or necessary?*
- *Is it feasible to rely solely on intrinsic rewards in schools with serious discipline problems?*
- *In the absence of extrinsic rewards and punishments, what does classroom management look like?*
- *What specific methods and activities can I use to cultivate my students' intrinsic motivation in order to improve their learning and behavior?*
- *To what extent will my students' motivation shift from extrinsic to intrinsic?*

Review of Literature

“The troubling truth is that rewards and punishments are not opposites at all; they are two sides of the same coin. And it is a coin that does not buy very much.”

“Do rewards motivate people? Absolutely. They motivate people to get rewards.”
Alfie Kohn

There is a vast range of studies—scientific, sociological, and philosophical—that argue against using rewards and punishments in a classroom. The results of these studies convincingly demonstrate that rewards and punishments are educationally ineffective and morally wrong. To create a caring and nurturing classroom environment, teachers must concentrate on building community in their classrooms instead of relying on the use of rewards and punishments.

Alfie Kohn, in his controversial book, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (1993), cautions us that whenever we raise the question of whether rewards and punishments are effective, we must first ask the following three questions: Effective for whom? For how long? And for what purpose? Citing a wealth of research data, Kohn argues convincingly that what “rewards and punishments do is induce compliance, and this they do very well indeed. If your objective is to get people to obey an order, to show up on time and do what they’re told, then bribing or threatening them may be sensible strategies. But if your objective is to.....help students become careful thinkers and self-directed learners....then rewards, like punishments, are absolutely useless. In fact, as we are beginning to see, they are worse than useless—they are actually counterproductive” (1993, pp. 41-42). They are counterproductive because they undermine students’ intrinsic motivation to engage in positive deeds, thereby creating the constant need for more rewards and punishments. Kohn, in *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (1996), argues that the strategies and

methods that most classroom management programs offer are “short-term fixes, instruments of control intended, at best, to stop bad behaviors rather than affirmatively help children to become good people.” (1996, p. xv) I believe the true test of a classroom’s character is how its students behave in the absence of its teacher, rather than how they act under the watchful eye of a teacher who constantly doles out rewards and punishments. In other words, can students do the right things on their own, without the prospect of any extrinsic rewards and punishments?

Martin Haberman, in his book *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (1995), also points out that for teachers to pretend that they can employ punishments to force students to learn or to comply with their wishes is a dangerous myth that can make poor schools as coercive and violent as the neighborhoods outside the school. Children growing up in neighborhoods where they are socialized to violence, physical abuse, and even death, will not be brought readily into submission by such punishments as a time-out room, suspension, or even expulsion. Therefore, effective teachers realize very quickly that they can succeed only by moving away from the power theme. They “engage in gentle teaching aimed at making learning intrinsic and students accountable” (1995, p. 91).

Not only are rewards and punishments ineffective in educating our students to become independent, motivated, lifelong learners and citizens, they are also morally wrong. Alfie Kohn argues that the fundamental guiding principle behind rewards and punishments is this: “If you do this, you’ll get that.” For Kohn, the use of rewards as well as punishments is “nothing if not an exercise of power” (1993, p. 17) through which teachers aim to manipulate and control their students’ behaviors. They represent the teachers’ tendency to *do to*, rather than *do with*, students to solve problems collaboratively, thereby undermining the sense of community in the classroom. They also inhibit students’ social and moral development by encouraging them to

think mostly in terms of their actions' consequences for themselves rather than their impact on the welfare of other members of the classroom community. In other words, rewards and punishments promote self-interest instead of consideration for the well-being of others, which is the basis of moral development. As rewards and punishments are used fundamentally as means of control, they are by nature inimical to democracy, critical questioning, and the free exchange of ideas among equal participants.

On a grander scale, Nel Noddings, a philosopher of education at Stanford University, proposes an alternative vision of education in which "schools should be committed to a great moral purpose: to care for children so that they, too, will be prepared to care" (1992, p. xi). Noddings argues that underlying our current philosophy of schooling is an "ideology of control". No doubt, classroom management programs that rely primarily on using rewards and punishments to achieve immediate compliance of students subscribe to this ideology of control. In her vision, "education might best be organized around centers of care: care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for nonhuman animals, for plants and the physical environment, for the human-made world of objects and instruments, and for ideas" (1992, p. xiii). When "I don't care!" is one of the most frequently expressed sentiments in many urban schools, Noddings's "challenge to care in schools" provides an urgent and invaluable platform for teachers to re-assess their vision, assumptions, and methods for urban education.

Along similar lines, Frances Jones, in the Foreword to Kohn's *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (1996), states that the "dissolution of punishments and rewards altogether is necessary in a community based on worth and caring." Instead of simply expecting students to comply with our every demand, our priority should be to try our best to identify, and

then satisfy, our students' needs. Instead of treating children as objects whose behaviors we must control and "modify" by manipulation through rewards and punishments, we must begin to treat them as subjects capable of doing things for their intrinsic value. Most importantly, instead of perpetuating the familiar vicious circle of violence and anger so prevalent in inner-city schools, teachers must strive to create an auspicious circle of trust and care. To do so, we begin by eliminating rewards and punishments.

Methodology

- *Teacher Journal*: I wrote daily entries to reflect on my intentions and efforts, their outcomes, difficulties encountered, thoughts and feelings about that day, and possible alterations in my plans or ways of thinking.
- *Class Meeting Discussions*: I held regular class meetings for students to discuss issues that affected the classroom as a whole. Students deliberated and made decisions on these issues. I recorded significant events or patterns in my Teacher Journal.
- *Student Surveys*: I administered a Pre- and a Post-Student Motivation Survey to gauge any changes in my students' thoughts and feelings on issues related to various aspects of my research questions.
- *Student Journals*: At the end of most days, students wrote in their journals to reflect on various aspects of their learning and the classroom. Occasionally, I gave students prompts about issues related to my research questions.

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Data and Preliminary Analysis

Teacher Journal Entries--Summary

I had originally coded my journal entries by using the general categories in the first column of the table below. I soon found them to be too inclusive and thus not very revealing or helpful. I then broke them down into the subcategories in the second column. These subcategories were identified based on a preliminary analysis of the results of the first-round of coding. At the end of the second-round, patterns emerged more clearly. The following table summarizes the results of the second-round coding from the beginning of the school year to May 2005.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>	<i>No. of Entries from Sept to Dec 2004</i>	<i>No. of Entries from Jan to May 2005</i>
Extrinsic Motivation	Rewards	1	0
	Punishments	15	14
Intrinsic Motivation	Social/Moral Reasoning	11	18
	Community-Building	3	13
	Teacher/Student Bonding	10	12
	Curriculum	4	3
Psychological Strain	Losing Temper or Patience	17	15
	Fatigue/ Burn-out	9	7

Productivity and Efficiency	Test Preparation	1	4
	Curriculum Coverage	1	2
Keeping Control and Order		12	4

This table of summary indicates that there were both continuities and divergencies during the school year. The following patterns, for example, remained basically the same throughout the year: my regular use of punishments; my on-going attempts to bond with my students; my temper and resulting fatigue when things went poorly in the classroom; and my occasional worry about not having enough time to cover the curriculum. The table of summary also highlights the following important differences between the first and the second half of the year: keeping control and order stopped being a primary concern for me; and I increased drastically my efforts to build community and to engage students in discussions about matters of right and wrong in my classroom.

Teacher Journal Entries--Narrative

On the first day of class, I was a nervous wreck; I had heard so many alarming things about students' unruly behavior at my new school. Sure enough, the minute they entered the classroom, most of the students started acting up. From past experience, I knew that students tend to test new teachers by pressing all their buttons and pushing them to their limits. My goal was to hang in there until things settled down a bit.

I barely survived the first week. So many students were yelling across the room to one another and not paying any attention, I could hardly teach. I was scared to take students out for

bathroom breaks and other transitions because they would become so loud and chaotic that I was afraid that other teachers would complain and view me as a totally incompetent teacher with no control over my students. Out of desperation, I resorted to putting on my “mean” face and handed out punishments quickly and readily. My main weapon was the “name-on-the-board” system—a gentle reminder for the first time a student misbehaves; a verbal warning for the second time; and his/her name on the board for the third. After that, the student receives a check next to his/her name for each additional infraction during the day. One check meant silent lunch; two checks meant no recess; and three checks meant detention.

After the first week, things settled down somewhat and I began to feel more at-ease. I felt I did not have to put on my “mean” face all the time anymore. As soon as I had resumed my usual self, I chatted and joked around with my students every free moment. I have always loved having fun with students, so much so that I would sometimes get carried away and students would tell me that teachers aren’t supposed to get so silly. The following journal entry described my state of mind at this point: (All student names have been changed to protect their identities.)

“Today, for the first time since the beginning of the school year, I ‘fooled around’ with some of my students. I felt that they are no different from my former students at previous schools. I especially acted like a ‘fool’ during lunch in the cafeteria. Even though I am still having a really hard time maintaining control in the classroom, especially in the afternoons, I am beginning to feel that everything will work out, given time. The bonding between me and my students is beginning, and that’s a wonderfully rewarding feeling.” (September 16, 2004)

I also started exploring alternative means to using rewards and punishments exclusively. Though I used them constantly, I had never believed that rewards and punishments had much educational value. I believed that, in the long run, teachers must help students develop the ability to do the right things on their own, and not out of fear of punishments. Watching the negative interaction of some teachers and their students, I noted that:

“They did nothing but yelled at their students. I suspect they never engage their students in moral reasoning at all. In my mind, these teachers do not carry any moral authority at all. How will their students ever learn right and wrong? The whole interaction is based on coercion, contempt, impatience, and anger, perhaps even hatred....I believe, in the long run, my unique contribution and success rest on the fact that I constantly engage in moral reasoning with my students, even those seemingly incorrigible.” (September 16, 2004)

I decided to experiment with not using rewards and punishments. I first changed the way I selected students for “Incentive Fridays.” Traditionally, each teacher at my school selects three students each week to stay behind for an hour on Fridays for fun. These Friday afternoon mini-parties are intended to reward students for good academic and behavioral performance. They are wildly popular among students. During the first weeks, as a new teacher at the school, I simply went along with the tradition. I used a wall chart to track students’ daily behavior. Any student who did not have his or her name on the board that day would get a sticker. At the end of the week, I would select the three students who had the most stickers on the Daily Behavioral Chart. Unfortunately, every week, a few students would invariably get angry for not being selected. They would then proceed to argue with me and, before we knew it, we would all be unhappy! Therefore, I decided to change this practice. Instead of using “Incentive Fridays” as incentives, I simply went down the alphabetical listing of students and picked three people on the list. This way, every student, including those who constantly misbehaved, would get a chance. I shared this suggestion with my students and explained the reasoning behind my decision. Everybody agreed enthusiastically.

I then proceeded to experiment with doing away with punishments. The following journal entry described one of my first attempts:

“Today I made a breakthrough in my teaching and my thinking. When the students came in, I decided not to say anything or make any ‘threats’ to hurry them to settle down to begin their silent reading. I just sat at my desk and pretended to be immersed totally in my book. I didn’t even raise my head....After about 15 minutes,

students finally settled down and began reading silently. Even though there were occasionally ‘Shut Ups!’ and paper-throwings, everyone started to read eventually. The success of this experiment proved to me that I simply cannot force students to enjoy reading; they must settle down on their own because they believe that that’s the right thing or enjoyable thing to do themselves. In other words, extrinsic rewards and punishments won’t work; only intrinsic motivation does. Teachers may be able to coerce or force students to sit down, but we cannot force students to read in any meaningful way.” (September 17, 2004)

A tough question for me at this time was whether I should inform students honestly of my intention to do away with rewards and punishments. I have always been very honest and upfront with my students; however, I was afraid that by telling them that I would not punish them any more, I would be inviting them to misbehave. And that would be suicide! Anyway, I eventually decided to tell students the truth because I believe it is important to show them how I grapple with different sides of a thorny moral issue. On September 22, I made the following entry:

“For part of today, I told students I wouldn’t put any names on the board because I wanted to experiment by doing away with rewards and punishments. I appealed to their sense of right and wrong.”

I also began consciously to invest more time in explaining and justifying my actions to my students. I believe this is an effective strategy to promote the social and moral development of students, especially in schools like mine, with a student body that demonstrates low academic achievement and disciplinary problems. I described my philosophy and commitment in the following journal entry:

“What’s wrong with public education is that most teachers think they must yell or force their students into submission. On the contrary, we must eliminate this kind of coercion and yelling altogether and replace it with moral reasoning. We must, with extreme patience, compassion, and calm, reason with our students, explain to them why their behavior is ‘wrong’ and help them to understand and do the ‘right’ things.” (September 17, 2004)

Though I consciously tried to bond with my students and to constantly engage them in discussions of social and moral questions, ultimately, these efforts were not enough to obtain

their cooperation and I had to resume the use of punishments. The following excerpts are typical entries in this period: “Today was not a good day. I was in my ‘mean’ mood; in other words, I kept threatening students with consequences” (September 20, 2004); “Today was absolutely horrible. I lost control and snapped at students continuously” (September 23, 2004); and “Today was a terrible day overall, even though it has some bright moments” (October 13, 2005).

This pattern continued up to the Winter Break. During this period, I swung like a pendulum between two extremes: not using rewards and punishments at all, and relying heavily, if not exclusively, on them. This schizophrenic pattern drained me of all energy, patience, and goodwill towards my students. Time after time, I would begin the day seeking students’ cooperation through reasoning, but after lunch, when students began to really act up, I would run out of energy and patience and resorted to constant threats of punishments, such as silent lunches and detentions. On September 28th, I wrote, “Today, I feel tired and weary. I hope I am not burning out. The whole day was a battle of wills with my students.” On October 13, I wrote:

“...the whole class started yelling and running around. Despite my numerous pleas, they did not respond positively. I had a hard time just delivering my lesson. In fact, I was about to just give up trying to teach several times. Finally, my patience gave in and I started to put on my ‘mean’ face again. I started to raise my voice and put names on the board. When I saw Martha and Louis chasing around trying to hit each other, I gave them both SACs (detention) rightaway. Was that too harsh and unreasonable?”

On several occasions, I even felt that it would require a “superhuman” effort to create a classroom without rewards and punishments, especially in a school populated by students with long-standing disciplinary problems. On October 28, I wrote the following:

“I am tired! Tired, tired, tired. I feel like all my energy is draining out of me. Every day when I get home, it takes me a couple of hours just to unwind. How long can I keep this up? I don’t know.”

And on November 22, the following:

“Why is every afternoon the same? Students lose their focus, talk excessively, and not work? Usually I can get through the mornings without having to raise my voice even once. But the afternoons are totally different. I have to put names on the board and raise my voice. In other words, I have to put on my ‘mean’ face. I always feel like a fool afterwards.”

There was another issue that seriously troubled me: I was spending so much time explaining to students why their behavior was wrong and detrimental to their future that there was never enough time in each day for me to teach what I had planned. As a new teacher at the school, I felt I was continuously scrutinized and under a great deal of pressure to “perform,” and I felt that time was always working against me. On December 6, I wrote:

“...I am simply not getting enough instruction or work done in the classroom. I have been spending so much time explaining to my students why it’s important for them to work hard and behave properly that I often find myself far behind in my lesson plans at the end of most days. I simply cannot let this continue. I must find a way to use each day more productively.”

I reached my nadir in December, just before the winter vacation. I routinely became so exhausted that I literally could not stand up to teach in the afternoons when we came back from lunch. I would wring my hands in my chair and tell my students that I just couldn’t do it anymore. A few times I became so exasperated that I ended up making comments that I would later regret: “If you don’t care, I don’t care either!” “Sometimes I feel like I’m just wasting my time”; “I am sick and tired of your stupid behaviors.” I was too tired to even administer punishments to my students. More than once, I entertained the possibility of not coming back next year. As my friends had told me last summer, “You are crazy to go teach at a school like that.”

The two weeks of the winter break rescued me. They rejuvenated and restored much of my energy and enthusiasm. I was ready to try again, though things did not change too much with the class; they continued to get out of control on most afternoons after lunch. That did not

surprise me. My attitude, however, had changed. I became more relaxed once I had decided not to become “obsessed” about order and control anymore. This change in my attitude was reflected by the decline in the number of my Teacher Journal entries for “Keeping Control and Order” from 12 in the first semester to 4 in the second.

During the winter break, I also resolved to take a step back and resumed using punishments to prevent myself from burning out again. Though I still had high hopes for eliminating rewards and punishments, making the decision to use these tactics when necessary took a big load off of my shoulders. I felt a lot more energetic, as the following journal entry demonstrates:

“Though today was also a roller-coaster day, I did not end the day feeling as exhausted and dejected as yesterday. In fact, I could even joke around a little bit with my students in the classroom. Though I put many names on the board and gave out two detentions, the overall tone of the classroom was actually less tense than it was yesterday when I tried my best to avoid putting names on the board. I ended up losing my temper and yelling at a couple of students late in the afternoon anyway. So, maybe some degree of discipline can actually be a good strategy to use in a transitional period.” (February 1, 2005)

Though I still did not believe in the educational efficacy of punishments, I concluded that they were “necessary evils” that I must continue to use as a stopgap measure until they could be phased out gradually over time.

To facilitate this transition, I resolved to invest more time and energy on activities that promote community-building and self-government by students in the classroom. My hope was that an increase in student ownership in classroom governance would gradually diminish the need for rewards and punishments. As a reflection of this redirection of my efforts, my Teacher Journal entries increased from 3 in the first semester to 13 in the second for “Community-Building.”

In order to increase student ownership of the classroom and to create a forum for class

discussions, I decided to resume regular class meetings. I had held three class meetings at the beginning of the school year, but quickly decided to terminate them when students constantly got out of control. It seemed a waste of time and I simply could not summon enough energy to continue them. However, now I realized that, unless students had more opportunities to practice participating in class meetings, they would never have a chance to improve! Although the students were still having a hard time staying focused and I continued having to remove at least a couple of students from each meeting circle, gradually, students became accustomed to engaging each other in active discussions of how the classroom should be governed. For example, on February 16, I recorded the following observation:

“Finally, we had a decent class meeting! Sarah and Lupe were able to disagree with one another without getting mad. I’m also glad that nobody told anybody else to shut up. Students did a good job in exploring different possible arrangements for silent reading, even though I don’t agree with the decision that they made—to change it to after lunch. I don’t think it will work but I didn’t want to veto their vote. We’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

I also resolved to engage my students in discussions of matters of right and wrong more frequently than before. Instead of simply punishing students for rule violations, I would insist on explaining to them how their behavior would negatively impact the classroom community. Consequently, my Teacher Journal entries increased from 11 in the first semester to 18 in the second for “Social/Moral Reasoning.” I included my own mistakes in these moral discussions. Whenever I made a mistake, I would apologize to my students. In doing so, I expressed my respect for them. I also helped them understand that, even though I am a teacher, I am not beyond making mistakes. I explained constantly that making mistakes is unavoidable; what is important is to understand why what we did is a mistake and how we could avoid making it again. I encouraged my students to hold me accountable for my words and deeds and to refrain from complying with my every demand if they do not find them reasonable. The following

Teacher Journal entry described one of my mistakes and subsequent apology:

“Yesterday, I tried to hurt Dana’s feelings on purpose. She’s been whining and mouthing off for the whole day and I had come to the end of my wits. When I was distributing the permission slips for Saturday Academy and she asked for one, I said that there were no more vacancies. Though that was true, deep down, I wanted her to have the impression that she was being punished for her behavior. As soon as I had gotten into my car to drive back home, I knew that I had made a big mistake. I could feel it in my guts. First thing this morning, I asked Dana to come out into the hallway and apologized to her. I explained why I was mad at her and that no matter what, I shouldn’t have tried to hurt her feelings.” (April 6, 2005)

In March, I suggested to my students that they create a class council to identify ways to improve the classroom and to help me make lessons more interesting. Students interested in serving on the council made short speeches in front of the class to explain why they wanted to serve and what their plans were. The rest of the class asked them questions and then voted to select three council members. After the formation of the council, its members would go out into the hallway once or twice a week during independent work or free time to discuss class matters. The council also installed a suggestion box in the room to collect comments, complaints, and suggestions from their classmates. While no significant results were achieved by the class council in the next month, it did try to improve interactions between students by rearranging how they sat in the classroom. The learning curve for a class council to function smoothly and effectively is steep, and I was not surprised by the constant bickering among members and their relative lack of concrete results in such a short amount of time.

Though it is premature to draw definite conclusions about the long term impact of my attempts to build classroom community and to engage students in discussion of matters of right and wrong, there were clear signs that my students’ attitudes were changing. More frequently than before, students actively engaged in discussions, even debates, about issues of right and wrong, especially during class meetings. Clearly, moral and ethical issues began to occupy a

corner of my students' thinking processes. For example, right before ISAT testing, my principal issued a memo to inform all students that any classroom having perfect attendance during ISAT week would receive a pizza party. One of my students immediately responded that that would constitute a bribe and that she was offended! Several other students also chimed in. I was surprised by how articulate these students were. They said they should try their best to do well on the test for their own good rather than for some pizza party. Interestingly, when our classroom did eventually win a pizza party, my students did not want me to cancel it. It appears that there was a gap between my students' "talk" and "walk." Perhaps this conflict between theory and practice is a necessary transitional phase from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Only when this conflict is successfully resolved will students fully develop their level of intrinsic motivation.

Looking back over this past school year, I realize that the most difficult and draining part of my journey to eliminate rewards and punishments has been the emotional roller-coaster ride I was constantly on. The following pair of entries captures the contrast in emotions that I often felt:

"...both my students, in their journal entries, and I agreed that today was a good day. They expressed that they felt they had learned a great deal of new things today. So, we had fun, and also learned a great deal! Overall, today was probably the best day I have had so far this school year. Oh, I did not write a single name on the board or make a single threat!" (November 30, 2004)

"Yesterday when I came back home, I felt like I got everything under control and that it was just a matter of time for me to become a "super" teacher. Today when I came back home, I felt like everything was out of control and that I was just spinning my wheels. What I was afraid of yesterday came true today—that a good day would be followed by a bad one. Today was bad!" (December 1, 2004)

And sometimes, on really rough days, self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy crept in, as in the following entry:

"I doubt whether I can ever be a "wonderful" teacher. I have too many shortcomings of character—quick temper, too emotional, "mean," etc., etc....I can improve my instructional methods, but I can't change my personality....how can I model proper

social and moral behavior if I cannot behave properly myself? But what is the alternative? Is it good for my students if I leave or stop teaching? Do I do more good than bad overall?" (April 7, 2005)

Class Meetings

Class meetings had played an integral part in my teaching for many years at two different schools. They had greatly enhanced the sense of classroom community by enabling my students to play a bigger part in making classroom decisions. They had also provided a forum for students to discuss and act on issues that affect the classroom as a whole. Unfortunately, this year at my new school, my attempts to introduce class meetings encountered serious obstacles.

I held the first class meeting in my room on September 24, 2004. On that experience:

“Our afternoon class meeting was pretty much a waste of time—most students lost interest and concentration after a short while. Also, students stopped taking turns to speak. There’s no reasonable discussion process in place today. I got the sense that they only wanted to have the class meeting in order to waste time. No productive or constructive ideas emerged. I felt the whole period was unpleasant and extremely frustrating. At the end of the meeting, I really felt like I didn’t want to hold any other class meetings.”

And, in fact, I stopped holding regular class meetings, even though they had been a staple of my teaching in previous years and had yielded excellent results promoting classroom community and student self-government. However, I did hold several more class meetings in order to address crisis situations that arose, such as the near classroom-wide harassment of Harrison for “acting gay.” I wrote the following entry on October 29:

“I think we had a great class meeting today. I also feel sorry that I had to put Harrison through an hour of torture. But it was necessary. Unless we talked about the conflict between Harrison and the class honestly, the situation would just get worse and worse. So, I’m glad we talked about it. I don’t know what was going through Harrison’s mind, but he was covering his ears throughout the whole meeting. He must be feeling terrible. Many students were very mature and responsible. They made helpful suggestions. Some even apologized. I hope the situation will improve from now on. I also feel that some students still do not get it! What does it mean to

“act like a man”? If someone doesn’t act the way we want them to, does that give us the right to call them names and treat them disrespectfully?”

In late January, I resumed holding class meetings regularly, once every two weeks or so.

While it was still difficult to keep students focused, our discussions gradually became more purposive and useful. It was very clear that students were not used to having class meetings. On January 25, 2005, I wrote the following:

“I held a class meeting again today. Haven’t had one for a long, long time because I thought they were more trouble than I could handle. I wanted students to select a way to decide who would go with me to see the Alvin Ailey performance in April. I didn’t want to pick a student arbitrarily. I also wanted to avoid going by academic and/or behavioral performance. But most students thought that I should go by academic and behavioral performance! After going around and around, Tonika said, “Mr. Lau, how come you can’t decide for yourself? Why do you have to ask us questions all the time?” I responded by saying, “Has any teacher asked you for suggestions like this before?” They all said no. Apparently, my intention to give students more say in the classroom is, at least to some extent, perceived as my inability to make decisions. It’s hard to judge how prevalent this perception is.”

This meeting was interesting for two reasons. First, while I was trying to avoid using the Alvin Ailey performance as a reward for good academic or behavioral performance, most students insisted on me doing so. I wondered if this was a result of living with rewards and punishments in school for so long that they were ingrained in students’ minds. Second, this meeting highlighted the sad fact that having teachers ask students for genuine input into how affairs should be managed in the classroom is completely foreign to them. These two “discoveries” convinced me that I needed to try even harder to sustain my commitment to getting students involved in making classroom decisions. I must avoid letting temporary setbacks discourage me from implementing activities to build classroom community.

I continued holding regular class meetings, and students came to expect them as an integral part of our classroom operations, so much so that if I forgot to schedule a meeting, they would immediately remind me. Increasingly, the class council members took more initiative in

requesting that I schedule class meetings and they suggested items for discussion or decisions for the agenda. While much progress had been made, it continued to be extremely difficult to get students to actively listen to and be respectful of one another. In fact, in every subsequent meeting, I had to remove at least a couple of students from the meeting circle for disruptive or disrespectful behavior.

Student Survey Results

My original intent in using a Pre- and Post-Student Motivation Survey was to gauge the extent to which students shifted from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation as a result of my teaching practices and daily interactions with them. Unfortunately, I discovered that it was extremely difficult to design questionnaires that would give me the information I wanted but also avoid leading students into “politically-correct” responses. As a result, the data provided by these two surveys were, I thought, rather unreliable and ambiguous.

The pre-survey included questions such as: “What motivates you to work hard to improve your schoolwork?” “What motivates you to work hard to improve your behavior?” “If you misbehave in class, what should your teacher do?” and “If you don’t do your homework, what should your teacher do?” For each question, four responses were given and students were asked to rank them in order of relative importance. Unfortunately, most students misunderstood and gave the same ranking to more than one response, thereby rendering their responses inaccurate and ambiguous. With the benefit of hindsight, I realize now that I should have pilot-tested my survey in order to better shape the questions.

In order to avoid the same difficulties, I designed the post-survey differently. Instead of using questions with pre-given responses, I used two open-ended prompts only. And instead of asking students to talk about themselves, the prompts asked them to give me advice to improve

my teaching in the future. The two prompts were: “Please suggest at least three things I can do to motivate students to improve their academic performance” and “Please suggest at least three things I can do to motivate students to improve their behavior in class.”

The following table summarizes the students’ responses:

	<i>Pre-Survey</i>	<i>Post-Survey</i>
<i>Motivators of Improvement in Academic Performance:</i>		
Extrinsic Motivation (Rewards and Punishments)	8	10
Intrinsic Motivation (Social/Moral Reasoning; Curriculum; Student-Teacher Bonding; Community- Building, etc.)	11	19
<i>Motivators of Improvement in Behavior:</i>		
Extrinsic Motivation (Rewards and Punishments)	6	15
Intrinsic Motivation (Social/Moral Reasoning; Curriculum; Student-Teacher Bonding; Community- Building, etc.)	12	12

Interestingly, in the post-survey, while many more students (19 to 11) cited intrinsic motivation factors for improvements in academic performance than in the pre-survey, the opposite is true for improvements in classroom behavior—many more students (15 to 6) cited extrinsic motivation factors.

Some typical examples of intrinsic motivation factors that students cited for improvements in academic performance in the post-survey are:

“Just try to make things more funner, for example, when we do math division have some kids come up to the board and have a race...”

“You can ask the students which are their favorite subjects and work on the others that they don’t like to make them like it.”

“Make social studies fun by having us put events into plays.”

Some typical examples of extrinsic motivation factors that students cited for improvements in classroom behavior in the post-survey are:

“You can give them punishments like write something 100 times or give them in-school suspension.”

“Give them no recess.”

“Don’t let the student participate in any fun activities.”

At the same time, about the same number of students (8 to 10) cited extrinsic motivation factors for improvements in academic performance, and the identical number of students (12-12) cited intrinsic motivation factors for improvements in classroom behavior.

Some typical examples of extrinsic motivation factors that students cited for improvements in academic performance are:

“You can start taking away their free privileges.”

“Be tough on them.”

“Give me silent lunch, and no recess.”

Some typical examples of intrinsic motivation factors that students cited for improvements in classroom behavior are:

“Try to talk to them first.”

“Talk to them why are they acting the way they are.”

“Have a discussion with the parent together to ask what both of you should do.”

I do not have a clear and logical explanation for these numbers. It appears that students have conflicting opinions and feelings about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation factors. On this score, one can say that my students are no different than me!

Student Journals

During the school year, students reflected on a large variety of subjects in their journals. Most of the time, they wrote about subjects of their own choosing; sometimes they responded to my prompts. I would like to focus on two topics that played an important role in the second half of the school year: class meetings and our class council. As with the results of the two Student Motivation Surveys, students' journal reflections on these two subjects also revealed very ambiguous and mixed messages.

The follow chart summarizes my students' feelings about class meetings:

Positive	Negative	Mixed
3	2	16

Some students, such as Terry, feel positively about class meetings. He wrote:

"I feel that this year's class meeting was good because the class express there feeling and by doing the class meeting it got the class doing better and even though some of the kids got kick out the class meeting, I say the class meeting is a good idea to start your next class with."

However, the majority of students expressed mixed feelings about them. The following entries are typical of how most students felt about this topic:

"What I think about class meetings is that it's a good idea and bad idea because it's a good idea because we get to express our feelings and a bad idea because some of us including me don't say nothing."

"I feel it is a good idea even though it is kind of confussion because it a good way to see how another person feel and thinks for an example a person say the don't get any work done because of there group. they feel dont like it and they think they should move see. And I think it is stupid because people don't won't to talk but they want to play."

“I think that the class meeting is wasting our time because some people do not listen and they are always talking yelling out when they do not have the stick and sometimes they say bad things to people in they will wont to fight.”

As for our class council, the following chart summarizes my students’ feelings:

Positive	Negative	Mixed
5	5	8

Though making up a smaller proportion, mixed feelings are still shared by a majority of students. The following entries are typical examples:

“Well I think that it is good to have a student council cause it can help the class. Then another thing is that it can help Mr. Lau with the things in class. Class council is something like a class effort...”

“I think the class council need to work together. Because they’re not doing there job correctly...”

“I say it’s a good thing because the class council can help the class and the teacher by working to decide what is right in the classroom. But the part I disagree on is that sometimes people don’t really do thier job and when that happen what’s the point of having a class council.”

While the majority of my students expressed very mixed feelings about both class meetings and the class council, I believe that both these activities contributed significantly to the shift in my students’ thinking and the sense of community in my classroom. In fact, in reviewing my students’ journal entries, what becomes clear is that nearly all students were in favor of having class meetings and a class council in principle; what they objected to was the disruptive and irresponsible behavior of their classmates. My belief is supported by student journal entries such as the following:

“There’s nothing wrong with the class meeting except that when they give someone a job to do and they don’t do it.”

“I have mixed feelings because the students don’t be listening and talking when other people are talking...on the other side people can open up their mind and tell

everybody what she/he thinks and not have to keep it inside...”

“I think class meetings are nice and helpful because we act to discuss problems as a class. I also think class meetings are a waste of time...a lot of people either get put out of the meeting, doesn't want to participate in the meeting, or distracts everybody.”

Further Analysis and Reflections

Reflecting on entries in my Teacher Journal, results of the two Student Motivation Surveys, the proceedings and discussions of the class meetings, and my students' reflections in their journals, I realized the following:

- Despite the tremendous physical and emotional demands of this school year, I am further convinced that extrinsic rewards and punishments are ineffective and morally questionable. If I want to create a caring and nurturing classroom, I must abolish them. Nevertheless, as my experiences this year made it painfully clear to me, realistically, it may be too emotionally challenging to abolish all rewards and punishments in one stroke, especially in an inner-city school with long-standing discipline problems. To ensure the task will not be too overwhelming, I must plan for a transitional period to phase out the use of rewards and punishments.
- As my experiences, especially during the first half of the school year, demonstrated, extrinsic rewards and punishments cannot be abolished in a vacuum; something else, something positive, must take their place. Or, more accurately, something positive must first be put in place before rewards and punishments can be taken away without bringing about chaos or emotional turmoil for the teacher. Though my research yields no conclusive evidence, it is my educated guess that a stronger sense of community and a students' deeper understanding of matters of right and wrong play an indispensable role in this transition.

- While I was not able to abolish punishments this school year, I was able to prevent the tension and hostility that they often engender from poisoning the relationship between me and my students. On the contrary, throughout the year I enjoyed a trusting and nurturing relationship with my students; very often, we had a lot of fun! I can think of two reasons for this turn of events: 1) I played with my students in those moments when I was not teaching a lesson; 2) I constantly emphasized that, even though I am a teacher, I am not infallible. On the contrary, I also make mistakes. That I was not afraid to admit my mistakes and to ask my students for forgiveness really helped me earn their understanding and trust. We grew much closer as a result.
- Attitudes and habits do not change quickly. Therefore, the long term benefits of efforts in community-building and moral discussions are difficult to measure. Also, there are no clearly-defined and commonly-accepted benchmarks to gauge the progress in students' social and moral development. As a result, teachers toiling in this field must have a strong determination and a clear vision in order to withstand the uncertainty and stress that inevitably comes their way. Small victories, perhaps, must suffice to sustain these teachers' efforts.
- In his book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer argues that "We teach who we are" and that "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (1998, p. 10). Accordingly, before I can be a good role model for my students, I must first address the anger, impatience, and sense of inadequacy that I struggled with throughout the year. Unless I can resolve my inner conflicts, how can I help my students resolve their emotional, social, and moral conflicts? Of all the challenges that I must overcome in order to create a caring, safe, and nurturing learning environment for

my students, this is surely the greatest, for there are no clear and reliable guide-posts to follow to achieve our identity and integrity as teachers. In the end, we must follow our hearts.

Policy Change Recommendations

*“...schools should be committed to a great moral purpose:
to care for children so that they, too,
will be prepared to care.”
Nel Noddings*

In order to create caring, supportive learning environments for students, it is essential that the following recommendations be put in place:

- ◆ Policy-makers should include the social, emotional, and moral development of children in their definition, discussion, and measurement of student growth.
- ◆ Teacher-preparation programs should include an examination of the impact of different classroom management programs on the social, emotional, and moral development of children in their requirements.
- ◆ Organizations interested in promoting Character Education, such as the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Foundation for Education, should offer professional development

opportunities to educate teachers and administrators on alternative methods of discipline and classroom management 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.
- ◆ Schools should allow “looping” grade levels as a way to enable teachers to have a longer period of time to work with the same group of students.
- ◆ Teachers should focus on building community and involving students in the governance of the classroom by, for example, holding regular class meetings and creating class councils.
- ◆ Teachers should conduct social and moral discussions to help students construct moral meaning out of difficult social and moral situations.

New Questions for Further Research

Many questions are left unanswered or raised by my action research project, including the following:

- ◆ How can levels of intrinsic motivation be accurately measured?
- ◆ What happens if I begin the school year without rewards and punishments?
- ◆ Are intrinsic rewards and punishments only necessary during a transitional period or are they permanent “necessary evils”?
- ◆ What long term impact do class meetings and class councils have on classroom community and student ownership of classroom governance?
- ◆ What mechanisms, activities, or processes can I employ to increase students’ level of intrinsic motivation?
- ◆ What mechanisms, activities, or processes must be in place *before* rewards and punishments can be abolished?

- ◆ Can one classroom successfully abolish rewards and punishments if they continue to be a part of the larger school culture?
- ◆ How can a culture of intrinsic rewards be disseminated to other classrooms or made school wide policy?
- ◆ Can a concrete transitional plan be developed to guide teachers in their efforts to shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation?
- ◆ How might students play a more active role in determining the best approach to eliminating rewards and punishments?

Conclusion

A school year has transpired. How will I now answer the question Wendy asked me so bluntly at the beginning of the year—"Mr. Lau, will you love us no matter what?" No, I am still not ready to say that I will love my students no matter what; too many of their words and deeds demoralize me and hurt my feelings. After all, I am only human. However, I have decided that I will stay at this school and try my best to help it improve. In other words, I will care for my students no matter what, but only one day, one month, and one year at a time.

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