



Differences in classroom removals and use of praise and rewards in American, Chinese, and Japanese schools



George G. Bear^{a,*}, Dandan Chen^a, Lindsey S. Mantz^a, Chunyan Yang^{b,1}, Xishan Huang^c, Kunio Shiomi^d

^a School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

^b Poudre School District, Fort Collins, CO, USA

^c School of Psychology, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

^d Yamato University, Osaka, Japan

HIGHLIGHTS

- Classroom removals, school suspensions, and conduct problems are much more common in American schools.
- Teachers' use of praise and rewards are more common in Chinese schools.
- Greater use of praise and rewards correlates positively with teacher–student relationships.

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ABSTRACT

Students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships, frequency of conduct problems, and their teachers' use of classroom removals, school suspensions, praise and rewards were examined in this study of 3,588 elementary- and middle-school students in China, Japan, and the United States. As predicted, American students reported the greatest frequency of conduct problems and of classroom removals and suspensions. Chinese students reported the most positive teacher–student relationships and their teachers' greatest use of rewards and praise. Cultural values that likely contribute to these differences are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Positive reinforcement and punishment are the two most common evidence-based behavioral techniques for managing student behavior, with both techniques found in nearly all models of

classroom management and school discipline. This is supported by research demonstrating that the most effective teachers use a combination of positive reinforcement (e.g., praise and rewards) and punishment (e.g., response cost, verbal reprimands, time-out) to prevent and correct misbehavior (Bear, 2015; Brophy, 1996; Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008; Landrum & Kauffman, 2006). However, common types of positive reinforcement and punishment, and especially the latter, are not without criticism. In particular, in recent years the popular practice in the United States of suspending students from school as punishment for misbehavior has been the subject of harsh criticism. Often associated with the zero tolerance approach to school discipline, a major limitation of this practice is that suspensions decrease opportunities for students to learn and bond with others in school. This is supported by research showing that the frequency of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gbear@udel.edu (G.G. Bear), chendan@udel.edu (D. Chen), lmantz@udel.edu (L.S. Mantz), cyang@udel.edu (C. Yang), 2545662021@qq.com (X. Huang), kn.shiomi@gmail.com (K. Shiomi).

¹ The 2011 version of the DSCS-S (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011) was used in the current study. The more recent 2014 version (Bear, Yang, Mantz et al., 2014) includes the following subscales: Teacher–Student Relationships, Student–Student Relationships, Fairness of Rules, Respect for Diversity, Clarity of Expectations, School Safety, School-wide Bullying, and School-wide Engagement. Studies are currently underway to provide evidence supporting those factors among Chinese students.

suspensions is associated with negative student outcomes such as non-completion of school, juvenile delinquency, and incarceration (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Fenning et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2011).

Although less strident, criticism of the systematic use of praise and rewards, and particularly tangible rewards, to manage student behavior also is fairly common. For example, in his classic literature review on the use of praise and rewards, Brophy (1981) concluded that its effectiveness at the classroom and school-wide levels “has been seriously oversold” (p. 19). More recently, Adelman and Taylor (2010), co-directors of the national Center for Mental Health in the Schools in the U.S., cautioned that schools should not “over-rely on extrinsics to entice and reward because doing so may decrease intrinsic motivation” (p. 65) – a concern voiced by many researchers of the past (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984; Montessori, 1912/1974; Piaget, 1932/1997) and present (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999a, b; Dweck, 1999; Kohn, 1999). Researchers (e.g., Bear, 2010; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010) also have questioned the general effectiveness of school-wide approaches that emphasize systematic and frequent use of tangible rewards to manage student behavior, including the increasingly popular School-Wide Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) approach (Sugai & Horner, 2009; Sugai et al., 2010). Those researchers argue that there is little empirical evidence showing that tangible rewards improve school climate or lead to lasting improvements in student behavior.

Despite controversy over their use, classroom removals, school suspensions, and the systematic use of praise and rewards are commonly used in American schools to manage student behavior, as evidenced by the widespread popularity of the zero tolerance and SWPBIS approaches. However, very little research has explored their use in other countries. Thus, it remains unknown if those techniques are more specific to some countries and cultures than others. In the current study we were particularly interested in investigating their use in Chinese and Japanese schools. This was not only because those two Eastern cultures present a contrast to Western culture, but also because research has generally found less aggression and fewer conduct problems in those countries compared to in the U.S. (Chiu & Chow, 2011; Rescorla et al., 2007). For example, whereas Japan and China ranked 1st and 4th respectively for the fewest behavior problems among children in 31 countries, the U.S. ranked 20th (Rescorla et al., 2007). Such disparities in student behavior between countries raise the question of whether or not differences also might be found in schools' behavior management techniques. The primary purpose of the current study was to address this question.

1.1. Cultural differences in classroom and school removals

Classroom and school removals are fairly common in American schools. For example, Little and Akin-Little (2008) found that 56% of American teachers reported referring a student to the office in response to behavior problems and 39% reported sending a student out of the classroom and into the hallway. The average U.S. school has 355 office disciplinary referrals per year (School Wide Information System, 2013), and it is estimated that approximately 3.3 million students receive one or more out-of-school suspensions each school year (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). In another study, 39% of American public schools reported using suspension for 5 days or more, expulsion, or student transfer in response to a behavior problem (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014). Estimates on the number of students removed from the classroom or school in China and Japan are unknown, but researchers have reported that the practice is rare (Akiba, 2004; Akiba, Shimizu, & Zhuang, 2010). Although this is likely due to infrequent behavior problems, cultural differences in how teachers view classroom

removals also may play a role. For example, Kyriacou (2010) surmised that Japanese teachers' unfavorable perceptions of school removal were related to Japanese teachers' attributions of student misbehavior. He found that most Japanese teachers attribute behavior problems primarily to parents “who do not instill pro-school values” (p. 216). In attributing behavior problems to the home, Japanese teachers believe that sending students home is of little value in correcting misbehavior and might cause more harm than good.

Another possible reason why classroom and school removals would be much less common in China and Japan than in the U.S. is because removals are inconsistent with the highly prized cultural value of social harmony – a Confucian value shared by Chinese and Japanese cultures (Crystal et al., 1994; Muhtadie, Zhou, Eisenberg, & Wang, 2013; Triandis, 1995). When viewed in light of this cultural value, detaching students from their peers and teachers by removing them from the classroom is culturally inappropriate (Akiba, 2004; Akiba et al., 2010; LeTendre, 2000). Moreover, such removal is likely to induce intense shame – a negative self-conscious emotion related to student behavior more in Japan and China than in the U.S. (Bear, Uribe-Zarain, Manning, & Shiomi, 2009). As such, removals not only decrease academic instruction and increase exposure to parents who lack pro-school values, but also detach students from classmates and their teachers. School removals also fail to address the perceived primary causes of misbehavior (i.e., the home and detachment from others). Attributing misbehavior primarily to the home and to the lack of attachment to the school stands in contrast to American teachers who most frequently attribute misbehavior to student's lack of self-control, which is an attribution often used to rationalize and justify punitive consequences (Reyna & Weiner, 2001).

We know of no studies that have compared the extent to which classroom removals and school suspensions are used in the U.S. compared to China or Japan. Clearly, forms of punishment, such as verbal reprimands, extra work, loss of privileges, and demerits are widely used in Asian countries characterized by hierarchical roles and influenced by Confucian values (Sun, 2015). This would include China and Japan. However, several recent cross-cultural studies have indicated that punishment in general is a more common classroom management technique in Western countries than in China and Japan. In a series of studies examining differences in teachers' classroom management between Australia, China, and Israel, researchers found that Australian students (i.e., Western students) reported the greatest use of punishment (Lewis, Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2008; Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005; Riley, Lewis, & Wang, 2012; Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2009). Likewise, several studies reported that Japanese teachers, compared to American teachers, prefer constructive dialogue (i.e., talking to the student after class while inquiring about reasons for the behavior in concerned and problem-solving manner) instead of using punitive consequences for misbehavior (Akiba & Shirmizu, 2013; Kyriacou, 2010; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999).

1.2. Cultural differences in praise and rewards

Research, as reviewed above, suggests that Chinese and Japanese teachers are less likely than American teachers to remove students from the classroom for misbehavior. This is likely due to less disruptive behavior in the classroom and also to the cultural values that oppose this practice and the policies that support it. However, much less is known about differences in teachers' use of praise and rewards across countries. As discussed below, one might argue that either lesser or greater use of praise and rewards might be found in Chinese and Japanese schools compared to American schools.

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