Evaluating teacher and student perspectives on the use of rewards and punishments in education

Derman Bulunc [a], Ministry of Education and Culture, Lefkosa, North Cyprus, Turkey.

Zehra Ozcinar Uzunboylu [b1], Ataturk Teacher Training Academy, Lefkosa, 99010, North Cyprus, Turkey, zehra.ozcinar@aoa.edu.tr, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1974-2958

Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of primary school teachers and students regarding the use of rewards and punishments within educational settings. While motivational strategies are widely used in classroom management, a gap remains in understanding how both educators and learners conceptualize these practices. This study addresses this gap by examining shared perceptions of disciplinary methods and their perceived effectiveness. Adopting a phenomenological approach within qualitative methodology, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers and 11 students. The interview questions were developed by the researcher, and responses were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. Findings reveal that all participating teachers expressed support for the use of rewards yet uniformly regarded punishment as a necessary component of classroom management. Although some teachers reported rarely implementing rewards, none reported avoiding punishment. Teachers predominantly employed deprivation-based punishments, removing privileges that students considered desirable. Student responses indicated a preference for short breaks as rewards and the withholding of breaks as the most frequently experienced punishment. These insights underscore the need for a balanced and reflective approach to behavior management that considers the nuanced experiences of both educators and learners.

Keywords: Behavior management; education; phenomenology; punishment; rewards

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Zehra Ozcinar Uzunboylu, Ataturk Teacher Training Academy, Lefkosa, 99010, North Cyprus, Turkey.

E-mail address: zehra.ozcinar@aoa.edu.tr

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of technology, new applications have emerged in almost every field of education. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused distance education applications to come to the agenda much more in recent years. In addition to distance education, blended learning environments have been created and solutions have been produced so that students' educational opportunities are not restricted (Alsarayreh, 2020; Gabdrakhmanova, 2020; Zhang, 2021). Although innovations are manifested every day in the understanding of education in the age we live in, some applications do not change (Kan, 2015; Akkaya & Al Kapıdere, 2021). One of these is discipline (Aküzüm & Nazlı, 2017). Many educators have examined the reward and punishment method, which is one of the ways to ensure discipline. While this method is useful and applicable for some, it is a useless method for others. However, what is certain according to research is that each educator prefers his or her own, that is, different reward and punishment methods.

To have an effective learning and teaching environment, the factors that prevent this situation, namely undesirable student behaviors, must be eliminated or reduced to a minimum level (Pala, 2005; Pinchak, 2024). Detecting and defining undesirable student behaviors is considered an important step in changing the behavior and improving it. (Yumuşak & Balcı, 2018; Cao et al., 2024)

While rewards are used to motivate and encourage students, punishment is used to deter and prevent mistakes from being repeated (Sayın, 2004; Yu et al., 2024; Hwang et al., 2020). Such practices are considered reinforcement in education (An, 2022). While rewards and punishments used by teachers are similar in some cases, they differ in some cases (Kayıkçı, 2013). It has also been found that teachers who are parents use less punishment. Teachers who do not have children are more likely to impose punitive sanctions on students (Tolunay, 2008).

Moreover, in classes with moderate populations, teachers give more importance to rewards than in crowded classes. When teachers use the right reinforcers at the right time, a behavior change can be seen in the targeted direction. However, incorrectly used reinforcers will not have a positive effect on gaining or eliminating the desired behavior, and may cause negative results (Temiz, 2020).

Researchers have shown that the same reinforcer cannot be used for every student. Therefore, the results of every reward and punishment that the teacher will use should be well thought out since they may be unexpected (Yumuşak & Balcı, 2018). As a result of the research, it has been seen that the effect of the reward is short-lived, does not appeal to every student, does not always cause permanent behavioral change, and its motivation-increasing feature gradually decreases, so it is not sufficient to change behavior on its own (Açıkgöz & Babaoğlan 2022).

1.1. Related research

Turhan and Yaraş (2016) concluded in their research that students and teachers perceive the concepts of "teacher", "discipline", "school principal", "reward", and "punishment" differently by looking at the metaphors they produce. Pehlivan et al., (2018) revealed in their research that teacher candidates think that teachers mostly use material, psychological, and social rewards, and mostly reward students' academic behaviors. Girmen (2006) evaluated the opinions and reactions of classroom teachers regarding unwanted student behaviors. The importance of reminding the rules was emphasized in the research.

Keleş and Kahraman (2022) discussed the use of rewards and punishments in education. The study evaluated teachers' perceptions of the book "Don't Punish Me with Rewards" and revealed that teachers had a positive perception of the book. Arslan (2022) aimed to determine teachers' views on this subject by addressing the theory of reward justice and equality in his research. The study revealed that bilateral relations were more effective than legislation in teachers' reward and punishment practices. Bünyamin and Altunhan (2022) discussed teachers' views on reward and punishment practices. Preschool teachers, who constituted the study group, stated that they preferred social and symbolic rewards rather than material rewards.

Yilmaz and Babaoğlan (2013) aimed to determine how often classroom teachers use reward and punishment methods to ensure discipline and whether these reward and punishment methods show

significant differences according to some characteristics of teachers, students, and schools. According to the results of the research, it was determined that classroom teachers "often" use psychological and social rewards and "sometimes" use material rewards in ensuring classroom discipline. Kabaklı Çimen and Karaboğa (2015) evaluated the views of administrators and teachers on discipline problems in secondary schools. As a result of the research; the views of administrators and teachers working in secondary schools on discipline problems do not differ according to gender, undergraduate or graduate status.

1.2. Purpose of study

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the opinions of teachers and students regarding the use of reward and punishment in education. Within the scope of the purpose of the research, research questions were created for teachers and students.

- Are rewards and punishments necessary in primary education?
- What types of rewards and punishments should be used, and how often?
- How do rewards and punishments impact students' behavior and development?
- Are students satisfied with the rewards and punishments they receive?
- Do reward and punishment practices vary based on the individual student?
- If students were teachers, what rewards and punishments would they apply?

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This section contains information on the path and steps to be followed in the research. The steps to be followed in the systematic compilation of teacher and student opinions are given in detail.

2.1. Research design

In this study, which aims to determine the views of teachers in the TRNC on reward and punishment, it is aimed to use qualitative research method is used. When qualitative research is examined, it is a method used in problems that cannot be stated quantitatively and in situations that do not require statistics (Yıldırım, 1999). In this study, a phenomenological design, which is one of the qualitative information collection techniques, was used. Phenomenological design indicates the experiences of some people and is defined as creating a theoretical statement with the effort to create a theory. (Tekindal & Arsu, 2020). The results found with the qualitative research method and phenomenological design were evaluated in line with the information and practices found related to the decision-making process of teachers.

2.2. Participants

The study group of the research consists of teachers and primary school students working in the TRNC. 11 classroom teachers and 11 5th-grade students who were educated in a primary school in the 2022-2023 academic year were determined as the study group of the research.

2.3. Data collection tools

In the study, the researcher collected data using the interview method, one of the qualitative research methods. It was aimed to use interview questions prepared in line with the phenomenological design. In the face-to-face interviews, literature was reviewed in the preparation phase of the questions to be directed to teachers and students. It was aimed to determine questions regarding the competence levels of TRNC teachers. In the preparation process of the questions, 4 teachers who were excluded from the study group of the study worked on in collaboration. The interview questions, which were created by taking the opinions of the classroom teachers, were finalized by taking the opinions of 3 experts in the field of educational sciences. The research questions overlap with the research questions created for teachers and students within the scope of the purpose of the study.

2.4. Data collection procedure

During the data collection phase, the researcher conducted face-to-face and one-on-one interviews with the teachers and students who formed the study group. Permission was obtained from the teachers and

students to record audio and take notes during the interviews. There was no time limit for the interviews, and especially in the interviews with the students, time was given to ask questions when the students felt ready.

2.5. Data analysis technique

The descriptive analysis method was used in the analysis of research data. In qualitative research, descriptive analysis or content analysis is commonly used in the analysis of data collected. Descriptive analysis aims to present the data collected as a result of interviews and observations to the reader in an organized and interpreted manner. In most descriptive analyses, the data is classified according to predetermined themes, the findings related to the classified data are summarized, and the summaries are interpreted with the subjective knowledge of the researcher. In addition, the researcher establishes a cause-effect relationship between the findings and, if necessary, makes comparisons between the facts with structural difference analyses. In this study, the opinions of teachers and students were presented to the reader by the researchers using the descriptive analysis method.

2.6. Ethical consideration

A preliminary interview was held with the classroom teachers and students who participated in the study before the data collection phase. In the preliminary interview, information was given to the teachers and students about the content of the study, and verbal and written statements were taken stating that they voluntarily participated in the study. In addition, the necessary permissions were obtained from the school administrators where the interviews were conducted. All data collected for the study were used while keeping the personal information of the study group confidential. The interview audio recordings and notes taken within the scope of the study will be archived and will not be used anywhere else.

3. RESULTS

In this section, the responses given by the teachers and students participating in the research to the research questions were converted into findings. Quotations from the teacher and student opinions were coded and given.

3.1. Findings regarding teachers

The responses of the teachers who participated in the study to the question "Is it necessary to give awards to primary school students? If so, what kind of awards should be given?" are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Is it necessary to give awards to primary school students? If so, what kind of awards should be given?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Is it necessary to give awards to primary school students? If so, what kind of awards should be given?	Yes (Pasting)			X		X			X			X
	Yes (Star)	X			X			X	X	X	X	
	Yes (Stationery)				X	X		X	X	X		X
	Yes (Food)		X	X			X					
	Yes (Toy)			X								
	No											

As seen in Table 1, all teachers who participated in the study (N=11) answered yes to the question "Is it necessary to give awards to primary school students? If so, what kind of awards should be given?" As for the type of award, the vast majority of teachers (N=6) prefer stationery items as awards. The least common answer is to give toys as awards (N=1). The star award appears to be the most preferred award by teachers after the stationery award (N=5). Among the teachers who participated in the study, no teacher stated that they did not give awards.

Some of the teacher's responses to this question are as follows: "I usually prefer to give students financial rewards. Children like that type of reward more." (S-8) "We motivate students to study by giving rewards. That is why it is necessary to give rewards." (S-3)

According to the research conducted by Şahin et al. (2013), teachers prefer to give social and psychological rewards rather than material rewards. Topcu and Dilci (2019) also stated in their research that moral rewards are more important than material rewards, and that the love given to children is the greatest reward.

The responses of the teachers who participated in the study to the question "How often should rewards be given?" are given in Table 2.

Table 2
How often should rewards be given?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
How often should rewards be given?	Occasionally	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
	Always										X	

Table 2 evaluates the frequency of reward giving by the teachers participating in the study in the categories of sometimes and always. While the majority of the teachers (N=10) were in favor of giving rewards occasionally, one teacher (N=1) stated that rewards should always be given.

Some of the teacher's responses to this question are as follows: "Of course, it is necessary to reward students. However, we should not exaggerate the frequency of this task. If we reward students too often, the reward will deviate from its purpose and turn into a bribe." (S-9). "Occasional rewards will be enough to motivate students for the lesson." (S-1)

In a study, it was determined that some teachers in Şırnak province did not know when and how to use the reward, and as a result, students were negatively affected (Güzelyurt et al., 2019).

The responses of the teachers who participated in the study to the question "Is it necessary to punish primary school students? If necessary, what kind of punishments should be given?" are given in Table 3.

Table 3
Is it necessary to punish primary school students? If so, what kind of punishments should be given?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Is it necessary to punish primary school students? If so, what kind of punishments should be given?	Yes (Rebuke)				X				X			
	Yes (Not taking to recess)			X								
	Yes (Deprivation of reward)	X	X			X	X	X		X	X	X
	No											

Table 3 categorizes the views of the teachers who participated in the study on the necessity of punishments. All teachers (N=11) stated that it was necessary. Regarding the type of punishment, the majority of the teachers (N=8) preferred the punishment type of "Deprivation of reward". One teacher (N=1) stated that he found the punishment of "not letting the student go to recess" appropriate. Only two of the teachers (N=2) preferred the "reprimand" method.

Some of the teacher responses to this question are as follows: "Thanks to punishment, we keep students away from behaviors they should not exhibit." (T-5). "Giving punishment is not the only method to make students obey the rules." (T-3).

Some studies have stated that each teacher has their own method of punishment. If the dose of some types of punishment is exceeded, studies have shown that students may develop a grudge against their teachers.

Bulunc, D., & Ozcinar Uzunboylu, Z. (2025). Evaluating teacher and student perspectives on the use of rewards and punishments in education. *Global Journal of Guidance and Counseling in Schools: Current Perspectives*, *15*(2), 92-103. https://doi.org/10.18844/gjgc.v15i2.9822

For this reason, researchers have argued that it is not right to respond to the slightest action with punishment immediately, and instead, it is often necessary to approach with love and compassion (Yumuşak & Balcı, 2018).

of the teachers who participated in the research to the question "In what cases should punishment be used in the education of primary school students?" are given in Table 4.

Table 4

In which cases should punishment be used in the education of primary school students?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
In what cases should punishment be used in the education of primary school students?	When they do not fulfill their responsibilities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	When they disrupt classroom order		X	X		X						
	When they don't follow the rules					X						X
	When they bully					X			X	X		X

Table 4 categorizes the responses of the teachers participating in the study regarding the situations in which they resort to punishment. All of the teachers (N=11) responded that they did not fulfill their responsibilities, while four teachers (N=4) responded that they bullied, three teachers (N=3) responded that they disrupted the classroom order, and three teachers (N=3) responded that they did not follow the rules.

Some of the teacher responses to this question are as follows: "I definitely punish them when they don't do their homework." (S-1). "I don't hesitate to use punishment to ensure discipline." (S-11).

In their research, Uysal et al. (2018) stated that children should be told what the rules are and what the consequences will be if they are not followed.

The responses of the teachers who participated in the study to the question "What do you think is the effect of reward and punishment on behavior development?" are given in Table 5.

Table 5

In your opinion, what is the effect of reward and punishment on behavior development?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
In your opinion, what is the effect of reward and punishment on behavior development?	Correct behavior is reinforced and wrong behavior is discouraged.			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	It is effective for students who are open to improvement, but it is useless for students who are indifferent.	X	X									

Table 5 categorizes the responses of the teachers who participated in the study to the question, "In your opinion, what is the effect of reward and punishment on behavior development?" The majority of the teachers (N=9) responded, "Correct behavior is reinforced and wrong behavior is discouraged." The other two teachers (N=2) stated, "It is effective for students who are open to development, but it is useless for students who do not care." Some of the teacher's responses to this question are as follows: "If the student does not like reading, the reward and punishment tactic will not be successful." (T-2).

3.2. Findings regarding students

The responses of the students participating in the study to the question "Do teachers give you awards? If so, what kind of awards do they give?" are given in Table 6.

Table 6
Do teachers give you rewards? If so, what kind of rewards do they give?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Do teachers give you awards? If so, what kind of awards do they give?	No											X
	Yes (Pasting)										X	
	Yes (Star)	X										
	Yes (Leaving for recess early)		X	X	X		X	X	X			
	Yes (Stationery)		X								X	
	Yes (Chocolate)	X									X	
	Yes (Medal)							X		X		
	Yes (Verbal well done)						X					
	Yes (College Entry)					X						

Table 6 categorizes the opinions of the students participating in the study regarding the rewards given by teachers. Almost all of the students (N=10) stated that teachers give rewards. Only one of the students (N=1) stated that teachers do not give rewards. When asked what kind of rewards they give, more than half of the students (N=6) answered "Sending students to recess early". Other types of rewards were indicated by a similar number of students as rewards given by teachers.

Some of the student responses to this question are as follows: "Our teachers reward us by letting us go to recess early when we are smart." (T=4). "I like to get rewards and play more outside with my friends." (T=8).

by the students participating in the research to the question " How often do teachers give you awards?" are given in Table 7.

Table 7
How often do teachers give you rewards?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
How often do teachers give you rewards?	Occasionally	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	Never											X
	Always											

Table 7 categorizes the responses of the students participating in the study regarding how often teachers give awards. The majority of the students participating in the study (N=10) responded that they sometimes give awards, while one student (N=1) responded that they never give awards. There was no student among the students participating in the study who responded that they always give awards.

Some of the student responses to this question are as follows: "Our teachers reward us every week." (T=3). "Our teachers do not reward us very often. They reward us at regular intervals." (T=5).

The responses of the students who participated in the study to the question "Do teachers punish you? If so, what kind of punishments do they give?" are given in Table 8.

Table 8
Do teachers punish you? If so, what kind of punishments do they give?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Do teachers punish you? If so, what kind of punishments do they give?	Yes (Not going to recess)	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			
	Yes (One leg)	X								X	X	X
	Yes (Expulsion)		X	X	X						X	X
	Yes (Physical class cancellation)					X		X				
	Yes (Order will be changed)						X	X				
	Yes (Scolding)			X		X					X	
	Yes (Football is banned)							X				
	No											

Table 8 categorizes the responses of the students participating in the study regarding the types of punishments given by teachers. While all students stated that their teachers gave punishments, the majority of the students (N=7) answered "Not letting them go to recess" in terms of punishment types. One of the students participating in the study (N=1) answered "Football is banned". Being thrown out and one-legged punishments were also stated as the most frequently given punishments after not letting them go to recess.

Some of the student responses to this question are as follows: "I am a bit active, so I get punished a lot" (T=1). "I don't misbehave, but I get punished because my class is mischievous" (T=5).

The responses of the students participating in the study to the question "Do the rewards and punishments applied by teachers vary depending on the student?" are given in Table 9.

Table 9
Do the rewards and punishments applied by teachers vary depending on the student?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Do the rewards and punishments that teachers apply to students change?	Yes											
	No	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 9 categorizes the responses of students participating in the study to the question "Are the rewards and punishments that teachers apply to students changing?" All of the students (N=11) answered "No".

According to the research conducted by Yıldız and Erdem (2018), there are differences between the rewards and punishments given to special education children and ordinary students. It was even stated that special education students were almost never given rewards. The reason why this finding does not coincide with the student responses is that the students responded to indicate that their teachers were fair.

The responses of the students participating in the study to the question "How often do teachers punish you?" are given in Table 10.

Table 10
How often do teachers punish you?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
How often do teachers punish you?	Occasionally			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Often		X									
	Always	X										

In Table 10, the responses of the students participating in the study to the question of how often teachers punish you are grouped into 3 categories. The majority of the students (N=9) answered "Sometimes." One of the other two students answered "Always," while the other student answered "Frequently." Some of the

student responses to this question are as follows: "Teachers only punish us when we misbehave." (T=8). "Teachers punish me when I don't do my homework." (T=6).

of the students participating in the study to the question " If you were a teacher, how would you prefer to use rewards and punishments?" are given in Table 11.

Table 11

If you were a teacher, what kind of rewards and punishments would you prefer to use?

Question	Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
If you were a teacher, what rewards and punishments would you choose to use?	Prize (Chocolate)	X									X	X
	Prize (Stationery)		X			X					X	X
	Prize (Gift)	X			X					X	X	
	Reward (Less homework)							X				
	Reward (Early break)			X	X		X	X	X			
	Award (Medal)									X	X	
	Reward (Pasting)										X	
	Punishment (not allowed to recess)	X		X	X		X	X	X	X		X
	Penalty (Cancellation of physical education class)	X		X	X		X	X				
	Penalty (expulsion)		X	X	X							
	Penalty (Stopping in front of the board)		X						X	X		
	Punishment (Giving too much homework)					X						
	Punishment (Scolding)									X	X	
	Punishment (Hitting with a ruler)									X		
	Penalty (One leg)									X		
	Penalty (Grade reduction)					X						

Table 11 categorizes the responses of the students participating in the study to the question, "If you were a teacher, how would you prefer to use rewards and punishments?" The vast majority of the students (N=5) gave the answer, "Early recess" as a reward. One student each gave the answer, "A medal" and "Not giving homework". Regarding the punishment, the vast majority of the students (N=8) gave the answer, "Not letting students go to recess". The most common answer after this answer (N=5) was determined as "Cancelling physical class". "Taking notes", "Assigning too much homework", "Standing on one foot," and "Hitting with a ruler" were shown as punishments preferred by only one student each.

Some of the student responses to this question are as follows: "Since I love children very much, I would like to reward students in the future but not punish them too much." (T=10). "I would give harsh punishments to keep my students under control." (T=9).

Mahiroğlu and Buluç (2003) stated in their research that there have been punishment practices in schools for years. In the research, it was noted that physical violence was also used in the past. It was revealed by the

authors that these practices are banned today and that if they are applied, they can cause very serious consequences. Despite this, the research revealed that physical violence is still used in some schools. In this research, one of the students stated that he could give a punishment of hitting with a ruler.

4. DISCUSSION

As a result of the study, it is seen that all teachers support reward practices in the education process. This finding is parallel to the responses of the students. Although all the teachers in the study support giving rewards, it is seen that some do not.

Both teachers and students responded to the frequency of rewards given as sometimes. Teachers interpreted this as the reason for rewards being given too often, losing their purpose. After all, teachers stated that their intention was only to direct the student to the right behavior and that they never wanted the rewards given to exceed the dose and turn into a bribe.

Without exception, all teachers see the use of punishment as a must. Although there is a negative perspective against punishment practices, teachers do not avoid using punishment. In the study, although there are teachers who do not give rewards, there are no teachers who do not give punishments.

The responses given by teachers and students regarding the punishment practices differ to some extent. While teachers generally mentioned light and simple punishments in the punishments they applied, students mentioned more severe punishments. Teachers stated that they only gave punishments such as deprivation of reward and not letting the student go to recess. However, the majority of students stated that not letting the student go to recess was a punishment they received, and they also mentioned punishments such as being thrown out and being changed.

5. CONCLUSION

The research findings revealed that teachers mostly prefer punishments that deprive students of elements that could be rewards for them. For example, going to recess means a reward for students to have fun during class, while teachers prefer to deprive students of this reward as punishment. Teachers stated that the frequency of using punishment is occasional. In general, the teachers who participated in the research stated that they do not punish students when they do not fulfill their responsibilities. In addition to this answer, bullying, not following the rules and disrupting the classroom order also cause students to receive punishment.

When teachers were asked if rewards and punishments had an effect on behavior development, most teachers stated that correct behavior would be reinforced and wrong answers would be dulled. Only two teachers stated that this method would not work with students who were not open to development. The teachers who participated in the study stated that they applied the same rewards and punishments to girls and boys. When the answers they gave to the question of what kind of rewards and punishments you would apply to students if you were a teacher were examined, it was determined that going to recess early was the most preferred reward by students, while not going to recess was the most preferred punishment by students.

This research was conducted with 11 classroom teachers using qualitative research methods. It is recommended that future studies be conducted with more teachers and using quantitative research methods. In order to keep student motivation and motivation levels constantly high during the education process, teachers should include rewards and punishments that are instructive and positively affect the development of the student. When giving punishments, the second type of punishment should be used instead of the first type of punishment. It is recommended that the authority of teacher candidates to use rewards and punishments during internships be increased. Teacher candidates should be given training on issues such as the limitations and number of rewards and punishments.

Conflict of interest: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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