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# EXAMINING THE EXTENT TO WHICH BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION IS INFLUENCED BY BEHAVIOUR REINFORCEMENT, PUNISHMENT AND EXTINCTION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

Education plays a key role in the development of the child. The child has to be developed physically, mentally, socially, and morally. Such development involves behaviour modification. Parents and teachers play crucial roles in ensuring that healthy behaviours in children are promoted, at the same time ensuring that the occurrence of unwanted behaviour in children is decreased. They have to employ different techniques which contribute to behaviour modification in children. Behaviour modification is based on the theory of conditioning. The theory of conditioning focuses on two types of conditioning which are classical conditioning and operant conditioning. The two types of conditioning are concerned with the stimulus and reward system respectively. The paper therefore explains the concept behaviour modification. It also covers such concepts as reinforcement, punishment, reward and extinction in relation to behaviour modification. The paper draws examples from the Early Childhood Development (ECD) level. It further discusses the role of the teacher in behaviour modification. In order to contribute to the total development of the child, the teacher has to employ different behaviour modification techniques. The paper concludes that behaviour modification techniques used by the teacher have to be carefully selected so that children are not abused in an attempt to modify their behaviours.

**Key words:** Behaviour modification; Behaviour reinforcement; Punishment; Reward; Extinction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on behaviour modification and the different concepts that are involved in behaviour modification. There are many techniques that are used in behaviour modification. These include reinforcement which can either be positive or negative, extinction or ignore technique, punishment and modelling. The paper will discuss the concepts reinforcement, punishment and extinction as they relate to behaviour modification. To bring the paper into its proper perspective the discussion will be related to Early Childhood Development (ECD) level. The discussion and examples will be related to handling of children at early stages in order to alter their



behaviour as they learn in a classroom situation. The following key terms will be defined; behaviour modification, and reinforcement, whilst the other two key terms punishment and extinction will be explained in the course of the discussion.

## 2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Huitt (1994) defines behaviour modification as techniques that are used to increase or decrease the frequency of behaviours. According to Huitt (1994) such techniques involve altering a child's behaviour through reinforcement, punishment and/or extinction. On the other hand, Mather and Goldstein (2001) note that behaviour modification is based on the assumption that observable and measurable behaviours can be targeted for change, through designing effective interventions. From the two explanations of behaviour modification it can be noted that it involves shaping the behaviour of an individual through a number of techniques.

Reinforcement is a behaviour modification technique derived from Skinner's theory of operant conditioning. The Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers (2007) defines reinforcement as the presentation of a stimulus following a response that increases the frequency of subsequent responses, which could be positive to desirable events and negative to undesirable events which are reinforced in their removal. Reinforcement is therefore a reward that increases the frequency of behaviour.

## 3. THE CONCEPT BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

Behaviour modification is based on the behaviourist theory of B.F Skinner. It is concerned with the issues of discipline as the child grows and acquires the behaviours. Behaviour modification makes use of different techniques. These include reinforcement, punishment, and extinction, shaping and flooding (Study.com). Within the school and classroom set up the teacher has to deal with problem behaviours. Some of the problem behaviours that require modification are violence, aggression, hyperactivity, hyperkinesis, severe anxiety, depression, and withdrawal among others (Gibson, 1981). Problem behaviours that a teacher has to deal with are caused by many factors. These are family-related factors, school-related factors, and social factors.

The focus of behaviour modification is to reward positive behaviour so that the behaviour is repeated and punished so that it is not repeated. In the classroom set-up behaviour modification is characterised by definition of the problem, identification of the treatment techniques and the use of techniques that relate to everyday life. This is important as the school becomes an extension of the behaviour modification process that begins at home before the child comes to school. There is also need for the teacher to be guided by principles of teaching and learning as he/she endeavours to help the child. The teacher has to be accountable to the actions that he/she takes in order to change behaviour. As noted by Miltenberger (2014) behaviour modification is characterised by the following: precise description of behaviour modification; techniques have to be developed and implemented by professionals related to everyday life; there should be measurement of behaviour change and the de-emphasis on past events as causes of behaviour.

Behaviour modification does not focus on children alone, but adults as well. As it is part of the human development, it is an ongoing process regardless of age. It serves many purposes in changing behaviour. Human beings produce both desirable behaviour and undesirable behaviour. The undesirable behaviour has to be replaced by desirable behaviour. As noted above behaviour modification is applicable to both adults and children. One of the major purposes of behaviour modification is its contribution to the treatment and management of behaviour disorders. Such disorders include anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and hyperactivity disorder among other disorder. It has to be noted that behaviour modification does not necessarily have to focus on the negative elements, but the positive elements of behaviour as well. When desirable behaviour is rewarded, that contributes to the repetition of the behaviour.

## 4. BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION AT ECD LEVEL AND REINFORCEMENT

As noted earlier, reinforcement can be used as a behaviour modification technique. That is to say it can be used to shape the behaviour of an individual. As a technique it can be used to strengthen behaviour. Reinforcement is in two forms. There is positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement occurs when an individual is rewarded after an action. It is a direct reward to a child in class for example, which helps to strengthen the behaviour of the child. As teachers we have to be very clear on the behaviour that we reinforce. Positive reinforcement can be in the form of praise or comment. It can also be in material form. In class we can give positive reinforcement when a pupil performs well in an activity. This can be in the form of a token, star and special mention in class



or at assembly. The teacher may also express approval of the answer or work done by a pupil. Other types of positive reinforcement include physical rewards. When dealing with children at ECD level it is important to give rewards that will assist them in their motor and cognitive development. Such rewards can be in the form of toys, building blocks, crayons and picture books. Positive reinforcement therefore covers physiological needs and social needs. In that respect, positive reinforcement has a motivation effect on the child.

There are a number of advantages that are associated with positive reinforcement in school. The Georgia Business Internet Solutions, Inc (2011) identifies a number of advantages of using positive reinforcement. They note that positive reinforcement can be applied to different age groups, as it can be used effectively from toddlers to adults. They further note that the other advantage of using positive reinforcement is that it is relevant at home and at school. Such relevance provides continuity on the part of children at ECD level. It helps provide continuation growth in children.

Other advantages that have made reinforcement relevant and popular in modern day education are that it does not induce pain or punishment on the child. It actually contributes to developing their self-esteem and emotional growth.

Apart from positive reinforcement, there is also negative reinforcement. The word negative tends to confuse in that there is a tendency to assume that it has a negative effect when applied. However, like positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement strengthens behaviour modification. It has positive effects on the child in that it stops the negative condition. Negative reinforcement involves removing a particular stimulus following behaviour. The stimulus is negative, and when this negative stimulus is removed or taken away that increases the likelihood of the behaviour being repeated in the future is also increased. Examples of negative reinforcement may include taking children or promising children that they will have a quiz every week. Assuming that the children do not like quiz, each time they submit their homework on time they go for some time without a quiz. Withdrawal of the quiz may therefore promote positive behaviour on writing and submission of home work.

Another example of negative reinforcement is when children do not like swimming during week-ends and most of them are punctual to school on Monday, the teacher can reward them for being punctual on Monday by removing swimming sessions at the week-end. In this case, punctuality is being strengthened by removing swimming during weekend, which the children do not like.

Negative reinforcement aims at strengthening behaviour just like positive reinforcement. However, there are some disadvantages of using negative reinforcement with children at ECD level. It may work in the short run, but with time it may strengthen the undesirable behaviour. At the same time, it demands high attention from the teacher until the desired task is accomplished. The likelihood of the teacher abandoning the whole process before it is complete is very high. Both techniques of reinforcement work well when feedback is immediate.

## **5. BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION AT ECD LEVEL AND PUNISHMENT**

Reinforcement is different from punishment. Skouteris, Rawlings and Whitechurch (2004) define punishment as the application of negative consequences as the result of a response. Lerman and Vorndran (2002) concur with the above definition of punishment as they also define punishment as the imposition of an aversive stimulus in response to an unwanted behaviour. Punishment seeks to remove the undesirable behaviour. From the definition it can be noted that punishment involves the application of a disliked stimulus in order to change the behaviour of a child. Punishment should not be enjoyed by the individual otherwise it ceases to be punishment. Punishment creates a negative condition which is expected to change the child's behaviour for the better. Punishment can be used in both negative and positive manners. The aversive stimulus should not cause harm to the child otherwise it becomes abuse. It should not deny a child of his/her basic rights.

When dealing with young children punishment has been observed to have a number of advantages. These as noted by Mazur (2002) can be effective over the long term and can change behaviour permanently. The permanent change can come about as the child is able to link the undesirable behaviour with the aversive stimulus. That may therefore contribute to an increase of desirable behaviour. When dealing with children at ECD level the teacher has to explain to the child why he/she is being punished. In that respect, a combination of the aversive stimulus and explanation through the language the child understands best may contribute to eliminating the unwanted behaviour. Non-physical punishment may promote order, control and contribute to a conducive class environment.



Punishment can be in two forms. There is physical punishment and there is psychological punishment. Physical punishment can be in the form of corporal punishment, smacking, spanking, pinching, excessive exercise and manual work. A child may be sent out of the class as a form of punishment. At times a child may be asked to stand on one foot for a given time or asked to perform a specific task. The tasks that children are asked to perform as punishment in class or at school should be related to their ages. At this stage children are still developing, and any task they are asked to perform should not cause physical or psychological injury to them. It should be observed that the law in most countries including Zimbabwe does not allow children to be treated in the forms noted above. All these forms constitute child abuse. It is important for the teacher who handles young children to be aware of the forms of punishment that are permitted by law. Another form of punishment is psychological punishment. Under this form of punishment a child is expected to modify his/her behaviour through ridicule, isolation, and verbal abuse.

Punishment in any form has been found to have negative effects on children. Punishment because of its negative effects on children should be used with caution. Some of the limitations of using punishment as a behaviour modification technique include that it may lead to frustration, and creation of fear among children. Skouteris, Rawlings and Whitechurch (2004) identify disadvantages of using punishment as a behaviour modification technique. They note that punishment may create fear in the child and hatred of the teacher who has imposed the punishment and situation in which the punishment was performed. As a result of frustration, punishment may contribute to aggression. In that respect instead of changing the behaviour for the better, aggression may contribute to worse behaviour problems than those that were originally intended to be modified. Another problem is that punishment does not provide guidance and counselling to the child. Since it does not offer alternatives the child may actually perfect the undesirable behaviour. Punishment may set a bad precedence to children as they may see it as the only way of solving social conflicts and yet they have to be exposed to different ways of resolving problems. In some cases punishment may promote the negative behaviour it is supposed to eliminate.

## 6. BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION AND EXTINCTION

Extinction is one of the elements in operant conditioning as advocated by BF Skinner. Like punishment, it is used to eliminate undesirable behaviour on children. It may be in the form of ignoring the undesirable behaviour. It also involves the withdrawal of reinforcements. It aims at making the behaviour difficult by limiting or removing the connection between response and the reinforcement. An example is that in class a pupil may make noise as a way of seeking attention. The teacher may ignore the pupil as a way of changing the pupil's behaviour. Alternatively the teacher may create conditions that make it difficult for the pupil to make noise. For example, if the pupil makes noise with a bell, the teacher may remove the bell. The assumption is that if the child is ignored he/she will end up stopping the behaviour that is not yielding any rewards. As noted, if the response is not rewarded it is expected to cease to be emitted.

The technique has a number of advantages. It can be used to complement other behaviour modification techniques. It has been observed to work with no negative side effects which are found when using punishment. However, it should be noted that ignoring certain behaviours has its limitations in a classroom situation. A teacher cannot ignore intense behaviour. Such behaviour may disturb other pupils. It may also be dangerous to other pupils. There is therefore a limit to behaviour that can be modified through extinction in the classroom.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed techniques that can be used in behaviour modification. It focused on reinforcement, punishment and extinction as techniques used in behaviour modification. The paper discussed the different forms of reinforcement, namely positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. In the discussion advantages and disadvantages of the techniques were identified. Attempts were made to give examples that relate to the ECD level. It may be concluded that teachers have to be aware of the behaviour modification techniques that work well with young children. Otherwise they may end up using techniques that are tantamount to child abuse.

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