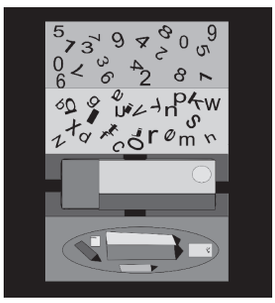
Increasing the Teacher Rate of Behaviour Specific Praise and its Effect on a Child with Aggressive Behaviour Problems



Thecla Kudakwashe Moffat
Team Leader, Apakura Te Kakano

ABSTRACT

A single subject design was used to investigate the effectiveness of an increase in teacher behaviour-specific praise statements to address anti-social behaviours demonstrated by a student who displays aggressive behaviours. Researchers agree that praise is effective in improving problem behaviours. They also agree that training teachers to use behaviour-specific praise can increase the level of praise teachers give to students. Baseline assessment was carried out and used to examine the teacher's use of behaviour-specific praise statements before intervention and the potential influences these statements had on the target child's aggressive behaviour, participation and engagement. The results indicated that the teacher's use of specific praise increased, and the child demonstrated positive changes with an increase in appropriate behaviour, and a decrease in aggressive behaviour.

Research paper

Keywords: *Behaviour difficulties, teacher praise*

INTRODUCTION

Behaviour problems often begin at an early age, in some cases before entering preschool (Campbell, 1995). After early onset, it is not uncommon for the behaviour problems to remain stable over time (Campbell & Ewing, 1989). In many cases, students with behaviour problems do not receive intervention early enough to forestall problem behaviour patterns from developing. Thus students may go to school with behaviour problems which hinder their success in school. In other cases, student problem behaviours are not prevented with positive teacher interactions. Researchers investigating disruptive behaviours such as noise-making, blurting out answers, noncompliance, disrespect and aggression have found overwhelming evidence that these behaviours can be reduced through appropriate use of praise (Lampi, Fenty & Beaunae, 2005).

Teacher Praise

To praise is "to comment on the worth of or to express approval or admiration" (Brophy, 1981, p. 5). Praise consists of verbal or written statements that acknowledge desired student behaviour and are manifested in different ways, including making positive statements about a person or an idea that a person has come up with publicly or privately (Gable, Hester, Rock & Hughes, 2009). Praise can be general such as 'Well done Tom' after Tom has done something appreciated or it can be specific. Behaviour specific praise (BSP) specifies what is being praised, for example, 'Awesome Mat for using your gentle hands.' Researchers have examined the use of BSP in managing behaviour, and have found it to be very effective (Feldman, 2003; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer & Martin, 2007).

Methods for Increasing Teacher Praise

In a study, examining the effect of visual performance feedback on teacher use of BSP, Reinke, Lewis-Palmer and Martin (2007) concluded that teachers increased the amount of BSP, significantly decreased the amount of disruptive behaviours in the classroom, and reduced their number of reprimands of students. The findings were consistent with earlier conclusions that BSP is highly effective in reducing antisocial behaviour (Feldman 2003). Other researchers examined the effectiveness of training teachers to use BSP, as well as giving students the opportunity to respond to questions or demands (Moore Partin et al., 2010). They reported that both strategies were highly effective in reducing problem behaviours They emphasised that teachers need to be reminded to use specific praise. Further, consultation and classroom support were recommended to keep teachers actively using praise.

Effects of Behaviour Specific Praise

Walker, Colvin and Ramsey (1999) have argued that the use of praise promotes a more positive relationship between teachers and students.

Fewer teacher reprimands towards students and increased positive praise statements can create a more positive and supportive learning environment (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, ibid.).

Meaningful praise should be given immediately following the appropriate behaviour. By providing praise following the approved behaviour, children who find praise reinforcing will be more likely to engage in the praised behaviours in future (Freeland, 2003). Similarly, Martens, Hiralall, and Bradley (1997), carried out a study to discern the effects of immediate teacher praise on appropriate behaviours. They concluded that using praise immediately following behaviour increased teacher use of praise statements while also increasing students' targeted replacement behaviours.

Brophy (1971) argued that children like it when adults recognise their efforts, particularly in their early childhood years. This is consistent with recent research which continues to report that specific praise increased appropriate behaviours and decreased antisocial behaviours in early childhood (Fullerton, Conroy & Correa, 2009; Stormont, Smith & Lewis, 2007).

Barriers to Specific Praise

Kalis, Vannest and Parker (2007), argued that specific praise was not commonly practised in the classroom despite its effectiveness. Lago-Delello (1998) concluded that students with behaviour problems encounter a high rate of teacher commands and received more reprimands from their teachers for inappropriate behaviours while little attention was given for their appropriate behaviours. Even when the students appeared to comply with teachers' requests most of the time they were rarely praised for their good work (Jack, et al.,1996; Van Acker, Grant & Henry, 1996). This would suggest that frequently teachers have not recognised children's appropriate behaviour with positive feedback. Rather, preschool students often receive teacher attention dependent upon their aggressive and disruptive behaviours (McKerchar & Thompson, 2004). The attention the young students receive for antisocial behaviour could reinforce these behaviours, particularly if they only receive attention when they misbehave. However, these students are likely to lose out academically as teachers decrease instructional interaction to avoid triggering and escalating disruptive behaviours (Moore Partin, et al., 2010). Thus students are disadvantaged by lack of positive support for their behaviour as well as minimal instruction.

Use of specific praise has been indicated to be effective in providing positive support for children, particularly in early childhood (Brophy, 1971; Stormont et al., 2007; Fullerton, et al., 2009). Nevertheless, research has shown that as little as 5% of praise statements were behaviour-specific (Anderson, Everton & Brophy, 1979). The purpose of this study was to use behaviour-specific praise in an early childhood centre with a target student we will call Tich and his teacher, who we will call Mona, to examine, (a) teacher use of behaviour-specific praise statements toward a student with aggressive behaviour, (b) the effect of feedback intervention on the rate of the teacher's behaviour-specific praise and,(c) the effect of the expected increased rate of behaviour-specific praise on Tich's aggressive behaviour.

METHOD

Participants

The teacher-participant in this study was a female teacher (Mona). Mona is Māori and has more than twenty years of teaching experience in the early childhood sector. She is currently involved in early childhood teacher training. She was nominated by the team leader and centre manager as a teacher who would be suitable to take part in this study. The student-participant, Tich, is 3 years 9 months old. Tich is also Māori. He was also nominated by the team leader and centre manager as a student who display aggressive behaviours including pushing, punching or hitting. His behaviour problems are mild. He is a full time student at the day care.

Setting

The setting is an early childhood centre. It has a total roll of approximately 60 students with eleven teachers including the centre manager. The majority of the teachers are qualified registered teachers, however, some are in training. More specific information about the centre and the teachers has been withheld from this article to protect identities. The philosophy of the centre is that children learn through play and teachers plan according to the children's interests. Physically, the centre has a huge inside area which consists of a baby area, older children's area and a food area. A sandpit, climbing structures, swings, a slide, gardens, and a grass area where the children play sports make up the large outside area. Four teachers are assigned to the babies area, three assigned to the older children's area and three assigned outside at all times. For the purpose of this study, Mona remained in the areas where Tich was playing.

Ethical Considerations

Written voluntary informed consent was sought from the centre manager, the secondary observer, the teacher, and the parents of the child participant through a letter which outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of the study, and the extent of their participation. Robinson and Lai (2006) state that the issue of free informed consent is extremely valuable, which had earlier been stressed by Winter's (1996) assertion that permission must be sought before making observations on individuals. The participants were informed that their anonymity would be protected. Their permission was also requested to publish the results of the research.

Assessment

Baseline assessment took place over five days: Friday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday between 9:30 and 9:50 am. Data was collected through direct observation, note taking, and audio recording. Intervention assessment was carried out three days a week - Wednesday, Thursday and Friday - between 9:30 and 9:50 am. Monday was left out because the centre seemed to have many teachers taking Mondays off every week, and Tuesdays were left out because Mona was not in the centre. During the observation time children had free play and were not restricted to any particular area unless it was raining and they all had to be inside. Thus, observations were carried out in different areas of the centre. The children usually had their morning tea between 9.00 and 9:25 am so the 9:30 time was chosen because there would be no disturbances to Tich's food and sleep routines.

Topography of the Problem Behaviour

Baseline observations indicated that Mona frequently reprimanded the children and rarely used praise. Almost every time Tich acted aggressively or in an unacceptable manner Mona would reprimand the child. However, when Tich engaged in pro-social behaviours, Mona did not respond with praise. Tich's aggressive behaviour included pushing, kicking and punching.

Function of the Behaviour

A functional behaviour assessment of Tich's behaviours indicated that Tich would push, kick or punch so that he could have a turn or because he was frustrated about something. Tich would also behave aggressively if he was provoked. Tich was also gentle with the younger children, particularly crawling babies. He was also a very good helper.

Measurement

Observations of Tich and Mona were carried out for the duration of the 20 minute period. The observer used an A-B-C descriptive data sheet to record the frequency of the dependent variables during each session (Smith & Heflin, 2001). The frequency count was calculated in five minute intervals because of the mildness of the problem behaviour. An anecdotal record of the observations was kept.

Interobserver Agreement

In 30% of the observations across all phases, inter-observer agreement was assessed for the occurrence or non-occurrence of reprimands, BSP and pro-social behaviour. The secondary observer collected inter-observer agreement measures at the same time as the observer. During inter-observer agreement checks, the observer and the secondary observer positioned themselves in places where they could observe without disturbing Mona and Tich. Reliability was measured for recording reprimands, BSP, pro-social and aggressive behaviours by scoring an agreement when both observers recorded identical frequencies of the behaviours during five minute intervals. Inter-observer agreement was calculated for each category by dividing agreements by agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100%. The mean agreement was 86% for the occurrence of reprimands, 93% for occurrence of BSP, 83% for occurrence of pro-social behaviours, and 100% for the occurrence of aggressive behaviours.

Dependent Variables

Reprimands were recorded as a frequency count when Mona reprimanded Tich for indicated behaviours. For example, "Tich you are not listening so I am taking that toy off you." Reprimands were recorded in order to measure the level used by Mona in her practice before and during intervention. Behaviour Specific Praise statements were recorded as frequency counts when Mona gave behaviourally-specific verbal praise directed to the pro-social behaviours of Tich, for example, when Tich asked for a turn instead of pushing to get a turn. Tich's pro-social behaviours were also recorded as frequency counts. This was done to establish whether there was an increase in pro-social behaviours displayed by Tich during intervention. Pro-social behaviour was defined as behaviour that showed empathy, understanding and accommodated others during play without hurting them. If Tich displayed aggressive behaviour instead of pro-social behaviour, the observer recorded 'aggressive' behaviour for that

interval.

Independent Variables

BSP served as the independent variable for Tich's behaviour. The number of BSP statements directed at Tich by Mona towards the replacement behaviours were recorded. Consultation and graphical feedback was given to Mona after baseline assessment. Feedback was repeated after every intervention session. Mona was praised for using BSP. Areas where she could have used BSP but missed that opportunity were also highlighted. Before every intervention session Mona was given examples of BSP statements.

Changing Criterion Design

The changing criterion design (Alberto & Troutman, 2003) was used to analyse the effects of intervention on Mona's use of BSP statements and the effect of the increased rate of BSP statements on Tich's aggressive behaviour. This design was chosen because the baseline assessment rate of Mona's BSP was zero. Therefore, the first criterion was that Mona should give Tich at least two BSP statements when he displayed positive behaviour within the 20 minute session. This criterion was increased by two BSP statement every time the target criterion was reached.

Procedure

Baseline

During the baseline phase, no changes in Mona's or Tich's behaviour were made. The sessions consisted of 'child initiated' play. Direct observation data were collected on BSP and reprimands by Mona, as well as aggressive and pro-social behaviours displayed by Tich.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of the observer providing Mona with verbal consultation and graphical feedback on the observed rate of BSP recorded during the 20 minute sessions. Before the first intervention observation, the observer met with Mona to report on the rate of BSP observed during baseline. Ideas on how Mona could improve and some examples of BSP statements were provided. Mona was informed of the possible advantages of BSP to students with behaviour problems. A criterion level of at least two BSP statements to start with was set and agreed upon, with a target to increase to at least six BSP statements per 20 minute session. The first criterion was set because of the zero rates in BSP statements during baseline, and the target to six was set because the teacher believed she could reach that level. Before each observation session, the observer met with Mona to remind her of the goal and to provide her with some examples of BSP statements. After each 20 minute session, the observer met briefly with Mona to show her how much she had used BSP statements. Some examples of how Mona had used BSP statements are provided (Table 1). She was praised for her use of BSP.

RESULTS

Reprimands

The number of reprimands per session given by Mona to Tich is shown in Figure 1. The mean rate of reprimands during baseline was three. This rate decreased to zero during the intervention phase. During week one of intervention, reprimands were used only once and did not occur during weeks two and three.

Table 1

Examples of BSP Statements. Student Behaviour versus Effective Behaviour Specific Praise Statement

Behaviour	**Behaviour Specific Praise Statements**
Sharing toys	"Excellent job sharing the toys you are playing with."
Giving a hug after bumping into someone accidentally	"Well done Tom for giving Jay a hug and making sure she is ok."
Saying sorry after realising you hurt someone	"Wow, awesome work Mau for saying sorry and helping Tim to get up."
Helping babies on the swing	"Way to go! Helping the young ones, they feel secure because of your help."
Gently touch	"Awesome work giving the baby gentle touches."

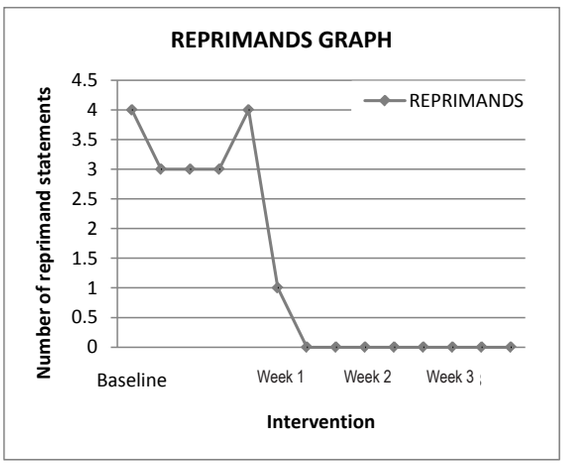


Figure 1 Reprimands Graph

Behaviour-Specific Praise Statements

The number of BSP statements per session given by the teacher is shown in Figure 2. The mean rate of BSP during baseline was zero. It increased to two during Week one of intervention. The mean rate increased to four during the second intervention phase and further increased to six during Week three.

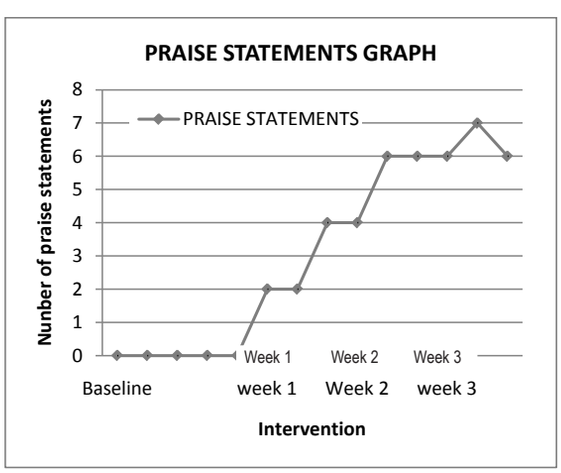


Figure 2 Praise Statements Graph

Aggressive Behaviours and Pro-social Behaviours

During baseline, the mean rate of aggressive behaviours was two with a range of two to four within a 20 minute session (Figure 3). During the first intervention phase, the rate decreased to one. This decreased further during phase two of intervention with a rate of zero ranging from zero to one. For the pro-social behaviours, the mean rate of occurrence was zero during baseline, ranging from zero to two. This increased during the first intervention phase to a mean above two, with a range from two to four. During the second intervention phase, pro-social behaviours increased to a mean above four, and in the third week of intervention achieved a mean of six. During the third week of intervention, no feedback was provided because Mona and Tich had both reached target goals. Rather, this phase was used to assess if Mona would maintain the increased level of BSP and whether Tich's behaviours would remain stable.

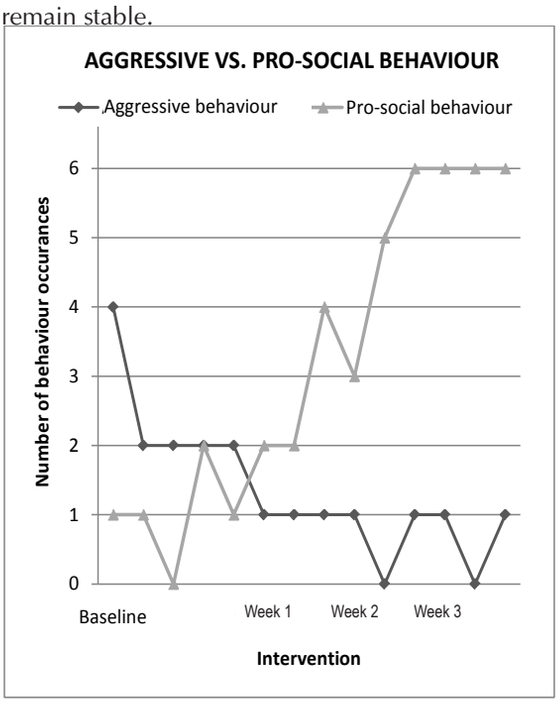


Figure 3 Aggressive vs. Pro-social Behaviour Graph

DISCUSSION

Results from this study were consistent with previous findings on the effect of consultation and graphical feedback on the rate of teacher BSP statements (Moore Partin, et al., 2010; Noel, et al., 2005; Reinke, et al., 2007; Reinke, et al., 2008). It was evident that after the first consultation with Mona, giving her specific examples of BSP and pointing out where she could have used this during baseline, she increased her rate of BSP statements, and decreased the rate of reprimands. This was also consistent with earlier findings by Reinke et al., (2008) that the rate of reprimands decreases as a result of an increase in BSP. Even the classroom atmosphere and rapport changed due to increased rates of praise. There also appeared to be a positive change in the student-teacher relationship and interaction between the teacher and the child (Lago-Delello, 1998). The relationship was now positive. Both teacher and child seemed to understand each other better. Therefore, increased rates of BSP statements enhance pro-social behaviours and reduce

antisocial behaviours (Brophy, 1971; Freeland, 2003; Marten, et al.,1997; Stormont, et al., 2007; Walker, et al.,1999).

The teacher's use of BSP statements met each criterion throughout the intervention phase. During the last phase both the teacher and the student maintained their positive behaviours. Although a high level of aggression was displayed by Tich during baseline this was reduced to a mean rate of zero during the last sessions. The teacher's use of BSP statements had also increased from a mean rate of zero during baseline to a mean rate of six during the last session. Although Mona was unfamiliar with BSP prior to this study, she seemed to recognise its importance as a behaviour management strategy. She expressed this during one of the consultation feedback sessions when she said, "It really works. I do not even want to go back to my old self. The children are listening to me and respecting me. I am using specific praise with all students now." These results are encouraging and promising.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are some limitations to the present study which were evident. Firstly, even though the rate of BSP statements increased markedly after intervention, the teacher was also going to class once a week for her studies and during the second week of intervention she had a tutor visit. There is, therefore, a strong possibility that the rapid change might have been due to the fact that she was learning some of the positive methods in class as well as preparing for her lecturer and this possibly contributed to her positive attitude. Secondly, this study focused only on a single teacher and a single student. Therefore, although the teacher did increase her rate of BSP and consequently the student decreased the rate of his aggressive behaviours and increased pro-social behaviours, the findings in this study cannot be generalised. Finally, the parents of this student were working hard towards minimising the child's aggressive behaviours as well so this might have possibly influenced the positive behaviour change.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical evidence on the effective use of BSP is overwhelming and it counters comments regarding the negative use of praise. It is recommended that teachers use BSP in the education system particularly as reinforcement for those students with behaviour problems. Teachers skilfully and consistently need to use verbal BSP with young children as it has been proven to be effective for them (Brophy, 1971; Stormont, et al. 2007). The skilled use of contingent praise could increase positive behaviour and simultaneously decrease problem behaviours (Moore Partin, et al. 2010). Evidence from this study shows that being specific about the action one is praising resulted in the behaviour being repeated. For example, when Tich was praised for waiting for a turn, he repeated this behaviour.

Given the focus in evidence-based practise, teachers should carry out more experimental research designs for students with behaviour problems in an effort to find the solution through evidence-based practice. As evidence from this study, teachers may encourage pro-social behaviour and decrease antisocial behaviour problems in their classrooms through the use of behaviour-specific praise. To reduce challenging behaviours, teachers should self monitor on their use of behaviour-specific praise. Teachers should form partnerships with parents so that they work together to minimise behaviour problems. In addition, through self-reviews, teachers should investigate events in the research environment that contribute to the effective use of BSP or limit the use of BSP. This will provide for the ecological intervention in children's learning. This study examined the use of effective praise. It is recommended that schools and other early childhood centres try this approach in their settings to contribute to the positive behaviour for learning in the environment.

In this study, an increase in the teacher's use of BSP statements resulted in a decrease in aggressive behaviours and an increase in pro-social behaviours for the student. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to use this evidence-based practice in helping students with behaviour problems.

REFERENCES

Alberto, P. A., & Troutman, A. C. (2003). *Applied behaviour analysis for teachers* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Anderson, L., Evertson, C., & Brophy, J. (1979). An experimental study of effective teaching in first grade reading groups. *Elementary School Journal, 79*, 193-223.

Brophy, J. (1981). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 51*(1), 5-32.

Brophy, J. E. (1971). *The role of teacher expectations.* Paper presented at the role of rewards and reinforcement in early education programs AERA annual meeting, New York.

Campbell, S. B. (1995). Behaviour problems in preschool children: A review of recent research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 36*(1),

113-149.

Campbell, S. B., & Ewing, L. J. (1989). Follow-up of hard to manage pre-schoolers: Adjustment at age 9 and predictors of continuing symptoms. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 36*(1), 871-889.

Feldman, S. (2003). The place for praise. *Teaching PreK-8, 5*(6).

Freeland, J. T. (2003). Analysing the effects of direct behavioural consultation on teachers: Generalization of skills across settings: Dissertation abstracts. I*nternational, 63*, 10-A.

Fullerton, E. K., Conroy, M. A., & Correa, V. I. (2009). Early childhood teachers use of specific praise statements with young at risk for behaviour disorders. *Behavior Disorders, 34*(3), 118-135.

Gable, R. A., Hester, P. H., Rock, M. L., & Hughes, K. G. (2009). Back to basics: Rules, praise, ignoring and reprimands revisited. *Intervention in Schools and Clinics, 44*, 195-205.

Green, D., & Lepper, M. R. (1974). How to turn play into work. *Psychology Today, 8*(4), 49-54.

Jack, S. L., Shores, R. E., Denny, R. K., Gunter, P. L., DeBriere, T., & DePaepa, P. (1996). An analysis of the relationship of teachers reported use of classroom management strategies on types of classroom interactions. *The Journal of Behavioral Education, 6*, 67-87.

Kalis, T. M., Vannest, K., & Parker, R. (2007). Praise counts: Using self-monitoring to increase effective teaching practices. *Preventing School Failure, 51*, 20-27.

Lago-Delello, E. (1998). Classroom dynamics and the development of serious emotional disturbance. *Exceptional Children, 64*, 479-492.

Lampi, A., Fenty, N., & Beaunae, C. (2005). Making the three Ps easier: Praise, proximity and precorrection. *Beyond Behavior, 15*, 8-12.

Martens, B. K., Hiralall, A. S., & Bradley, T. A. (1997). A note to teacher; improving student behaviour through goal setting and feedback. *School Psychology Quarterly, 12*(1), 33-41.

McKerchar, P. M., & Thompson, R. H. (2004). A descriptive analysis of potential reinforcement contingencies in the preschool classroom. J*ournal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 37*, 431–444.

Moore Partin, T. C., Robertson, R. E., Maggin, D. C., Oliver, R. M., & Wehby, J. H. (2010). Using teacher praise and opportunities to respond to promote appropriate student behavior. *Preventing School Failure, 54*(3), 172-178.

Noel, G., Witt, J., Slider, N., Connell, J., Gatti, L., & Williams, K. (2005). Treatment implementation following behavioral consultation in schools: A comparison of three follow-up strategies. *School Psychology Review, 34*, 479-492.

Reinke, W. M., Lewis-Palmer, T., & Martin, E. (2007). The effects of visual performance feedback on teacher use of behaviour specific praise. *Behaviour Modification, 31*, 247-263.

Reinke, W. M., Lewis-Palmer, T., & Merrell, K. (2008). The classroom check-up: A classwide teacher consultation model for increasing praise and decreasing disruptive behavior. *School Psychology Review, 37*(3), 315-332.

Robinson, V., & Lai, M. K. (2006). *Practitioner research for educators: A guide to improving classrooms and schools.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Shores, R. E., Gunter, P. L., & Jack, S. L. (1993). Classroom management strategies: Are they setting events for coercion? *Behavior Disorders, 18*, 92-102.

Smith, M., & Heflin, L. J. (2001). Supporting positive behavior in public schools: An intervention program in Georgia. J*ournal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 3*, 39-47.

Stormont, M., Smith, S., & Lewis, T. (2007). Teacher implementation of precorrections and praise statements in Head Start classroom as a component of program-wide system of positive-behaviour support. *Journal of Behavior Education, 6*(3), 280-290.

Van Acker, R., Grant, S. H., & Henry, D. (1996). Teacher and student behavior as function of risk for aggression. *Education and Treatment of Children, 19*, 316-334.

Walker, H., Colvin, G., & Ramsey, E. (1999). *Antisocial behaviour in schools: Strategies and best practices* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove CA: Brookes/Cole.

Winter, G. D. (1996). *Personality: Analysis and interpretation of lives.* London: McGraw-Hill.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Thecla K. Moffat

Thecla Kudakwashe Moffat has a great understanding of young children and their families. She enjoys being involved in professional development alongside supporting the education of young children and their families, so that they can have a brighter future.

She is a registered teacher who has worked in the teaching field for 17 years both overseas and in New Zealand. Thecla has taught in schools and early childhood. She has a teaching diploma, a degree in education management and postgraduate diplomas in Early Years and Special Education.

Thecla is currently studying towards her Masters Degree with Massey University, while also working full time as a teacher and team leader at Apakura Te Kakano. Her passion is to see young children grow and develop their potential. She believes in inclusive education for all regardless of age or gender. She believes that educators can make a difference in individuals' lives.

EMAIL
theclamoffat@xtra.co.nz