

Teacher and pupil perceptions of
rewards-based behaviour policies compared to
no-rewards-based behaviour policies.

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ECAD7004 Assignment 2023/24

Introduction

This essay aims to investigate the perceptions of teachers and pupils on a rewards-based behaviour policy compared with a no-rewards-based research policy. Most primary schools I have visited in Swansea use systems such as class dojo to award points for desirable behaviour which the children can exchange for prizes at the end of the week. However, through research and hearing about experiences from teachers in other areas, many have said that they recognise that the positive behaviour does not last; with some even saying it feels like bribery. These teachers mentioned that when they took away the rewards and

Literature review

As educators strive to establish positive learning environments, they must carefully consider the consequences of various behaviour policies, such as those based on incentives or not, and how they may affect students' behaviour and attitudes towards learning. This level of autonomy has become difficult to achieve in the UK due to the Education and Inspections Act (Department for Education, 2006), which has led to the requirement for schools to implement a school-wide behaviour policy. To do this, school governing bodies must first confer with staff, parents, students, and headteachers before developing the fundamental ideas of their school's behaviour policy. Since schools are legally able to impose sanctions, it is up to the headteacher to choose how best to encourage good behaviour and respect, with a particular emphasis on putting an end to bullying and harassment based on race. Schools are required to establish a formal system of rewards and punishments as part of their conduct policy. Students are informed about the expectations for their behaviour, the rewards that will be given when they fulfil these standards, and the consequences that will be applied if they do not comply (Payne, 2015).

There are many benefits to reward-based behaviour policies. According to Cowley (2014), incentives such as prizes and punishments may assist students as they accept a teacher's limits and encourage them to follow rules, behave better, learn more, stay motivated, and enhance low self-esteem. She does, however, state that consequences must be appropriate for the acts of the students, implying that instructors should not overreact to circumstances or give them a pass. This follows the principles of operant conditioning popularised by Skinner (1965) who positively reinforced desired behaviour in rats and has since been used by teachers to influence student behaviour (Bear, 2013). This is supported by Sanders *et al.* (2018) who found that performance-based incentives provided clear goals and outcomes, increased feelings of competency and motivated innovative behaviour under certain conditions. However, it should be noted

that this study was conducted in the context of performance-based incentives in the workplace, and its findings may not be applicable to classroom behaviour.

When looking at the views of the children regarding rewards and sanctions in response to behaviour, it was found that positive feedback, genuine verbal reinforcement and strong student-teacher friendships were the rewards that were viewed as the most effective and appreciated by the children. On the other hand, sanctions such as negative verbal warnings, missing break times, detentions and negative feedback in front of peers were not only perceived to harm behaviour but also decrease engagement in learning and therefore academic achievement (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2009, Payne, 2015). This could be explained by Cameron & Pierce (1994) who found that verbal rewards or rewards contingent on a specific level of achievement in particular can have a positive impact on motivation and attitudes towards tasks. However, this meta-analysis was later criticised by Kohn (1996) and Lepper *et al.* (1996) for being too simplistic, having a faulty methodology and not distinguishing between instructional praise and manipulative praise.

An equally important view that is often overlooked is that of a teacher. A study conducted by Hoffmann *et al.* (2009) found that teachers from three large elementary schools all used rewards in the classroom despite some arguing against their use, with a considerable portion regularly using material rewards, particularly for behaviour management. Although teachers frequently employed incentives to achieve both performance and behavioural goals, there were differences in how they were established and executed. While some educators viewed rewards as fixed, one-time incentives, others regarded them as reinforcement mechanisms that influenced their future behaviour. Furthermore, a significant number of educators did not favour the use of conditional incentives, indicating a probable knowledge gap regarding contextual considerations. This study stresses the complexities of incentive implementation, however only considers the opinions of teachers in three schools in North Carolina. This calls for more research to be done into the perceptions of teachers across different age groups and different localities.

Regarding school behaviour policies, parents have a tremendous impact on how their children perceive incentives and consequences. Studies are consistently showing that, while teachers may not notice the same impact, students place a high value on positive feedback sent home. Parents are also appreciative of this positive feedback and it can lead to a positive parent-teacher relationship (Krane & Klevan, 2019). On the other hand, however, inconsistencies between parents' and teachers' opinions on their children's conduct limit collaboration. Teachers commonly accuse parents of bad parenting by blaming behaviour problems on domestic situations. This distrust makes it harder to include parents in behaviour control. Good teacher-student and parent-student

collaboration remains the objective in education, but more study is needed to discover implementation issues (Miller *et al.*, 1998).

While incentives are regularly incorporated in school behaviour policies, psychologists have strongly opposed them, saying that they are manipulative and undermine children's intrinsic desire to learn and grow (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). According to contemporary learning models, children should take an active role in their education, taking into consideration numerous factors such as their environment, interpersonal connections, and emotions, rather than just responding to incentives and punishments. (Dodge, Coie and Lynam, 2006; Eisenberg, 2006). According to Eisenberg (2006), children who demonstrate disruptive conduct usually struggle to comprehend social cues and regulate their emotions. Furthermore, research indicates that if we overuse incentives, children may become less sympathetic and fair, and more focused on what they may gain (Manning & Bear, 2002). Furthermore, excessive use of incentives might give children the impression that they are being controlled rather than motivated to perform to the best of their abilities. Experts and educators concur that teaching children self-discipline for life should take precedence over following the rules (Landrum and Kauffman, 2006). Whether schools choose to utilise incentives or sanctions, the primary objective should be to promote and encourage children to develop into responsible, compassionate adults rather than to impose compliance (Lopez and Snyder, 2009).

Although educators play a key part in helping children grow into compassionate individuals, a child's behaviour is mostly influenced by their personality and family events, rather than anything the school does. This is shown by research from Thomas *et al.* (2008), who found that 6.6% of the variance in aggressive and disruptive behaviour was explained by factors at the school level. 18.8% was explained by factors at the classroom level, such as teacher-student relationships, rules and expectations, disruptions in the classroom, etc. However, individual-level factors, which mostly included aggression and attention issues at home, accounted for 74.6% of the variance in aggressive and disruptive behaviour. This showcases that behaviour, human motivations and reasoning are far more complicated than simply rewarding positive behaviour. I believe more research needs to be conducted on the use of no-rewards-based behaviour policies while still encouraging children to become kind and compassionate individuals.

Case study

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024), case study research is "an intensive analysis of an individual unit (such as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment". Another definition is "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context,

especially when the boundaries between the object of study and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2014). This is reinforced by Denzin and Lincoln (2017), who go on to further explain that adopting a case study is less of a methodological decision than a decision about what is being investigated. By using the case study technique, researchers may acquire a deeper understanding by monitoring various details and variables such as developmental factors and environments, which give context and explanations that may go beyond the scope of a basic experiment (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

This is supported by Harrison *et al.* (2017) who say that case study research is valuable when there are a lot of variables and it is difficult to distinguish between the environment and the issue. This typically takes place within a real-world context or the community being researched. This allows the researcher to observe all the variables to help clarify knowledge of complicated events by asking *how* and *why* questions. Rich data collection is necessary and might occur over lengthy periods with several collections, or in short bursts between collections. According to Marrelli (2007), to get a thorough perspective, data collection methods should incorporate many types of data when adopting the case study technique. Data can be collected using a variety of methods such as interviews, focus groups, document analysis, observations, or small-scale surveys. Furthermore, researchers must seek out the different perspectives of different types of participants to ensure an extensive understanding, in turn increasing the generalisability of the findings and reinforcing the conclusions drawn (Harrison *et al.*, 2017).

Yin (2014) proposed that there are 3 types of case study research: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Stake (1995) however described them as intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Moreover, Zainal (2007) suggests that there are also interpretive and evaluative case studies. Though these scholars have identified the different types of case studies with different names, they acknowledge that case studies have different purposes. Case studies can help us "understand and explain presumed causal links between events" (Tetnowski, 2015, p. 40). For clarity, this essay will follow the names given by Yin (2014), who explains that explanatory case studies explain the existence of a condition or the possibility that a series of events occurred; these studies show an attempt to engage in causal reasoning. When there is limited information available on a phenomenon, case studies can be both descriptive and exploratory. Exploratory case studies do not aim to apply theory but to generate theory and establish understanding. Descriptive case studies give comprehensive accounts of a phenomenon (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016).

Exploratory case studies have several benefits. They first allow researchers to investigate unusual or understudied events, sparking hypotheses and ideas. Exploratory

case studies contribute to the body of knowledge on a certain topic by delving into previously unknown territory. Second, these investigations frequently employ adaptive and flexible approaches, allowing researchers to study a wide variety of features of the phenomena of interest in depth. This versatility enables the integration of many data sources and methodologies, resulting in a full understanding of the subject. Third, exploratory case studies can provide detailed and complete insights into complicated processes. These investigations can provide contextually complex insights that are difficult to get through other research methods (Elman, Gerring and Mahoney, 2020, Mcleod, 2024).

However, exploratory case studies have several limitations. Firstly, the experimental nature of this research style may make generalising the findings to larger groups or different environments difficult. As breadth is less essential than depth, the findings are likely restricted to the single case or occurrences that were the subject of the investigation (Candace *et al.*, 2011). Second, because qualitative research, particularly exploratory case studies, necessarily requires subjective interpretation, bias may be introduced into the data processing and interpretation processes. Researchers should be aware of and alert to potential biases throughout their study. Finally, because of the large quantity of data collecting and analysis necessary, exploratory case studies may necessitate a major investment of time and money (Mcleod, 2024).

The 'object' of my exploratory case study is the teachers and children of my PTE2 placement school and the 'subject' I chose to explore is their opinions of their reward-based behaviour policy and their perceptions of a non-rewards-based behaviour policy. I have used convenience or opportunity sampling to select my participants by choosing 5 teachers and 5 pupils to take part. This sampling method selects respondents who are "convenient" to the researcher. There is no set technique for locating these responders; this could be people at work, on the street, or in a public place (Galloway, 2005). Convenience sampling's main benefits are its low cost, high effectiveness, and ease of use, however, its primary drawback is the sample's unclear generalisability (Jager *et al.*, 2017). I chose this method due to my own time and cost restraints.

Research methods

I decided to use both questionnaires and interviews for my research. Questionnaires are an effective approach to swiftly collect vast quantities of information from a broad sample (Rattray & Jones, 2007). They can supply us with qualitative or semi-quantitative data that can help us make informed decisions and influence future research. Furthermore, they help participants maintain anonymity, particularly when done online, resulting in minimal ethical complications. However, it should be noted that

surveys are frequently constrained by low response rates and selection bias. Furthermore, the design of a questionnaire has a significant impact on its quality. As a result, a thorough analysis of the benefits and limitations is required to ensure accurate and relevant outcomes (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019).

Questionnaires are both economical and efficient as they may generate large amounts of research data at a minimal cost. As a result, it is easy to establish a large sample size that should correctly represent the population from which a researcher may make conclusions (Jones *et al.*, 2013). By collecting data in this way, the participant provides information that may be easily converted into quantitative data, such as the number of "yes" or "no" replies, allowing statistical analysis of the responses. Furthermore, as each participant is given the same questions in the same order, the results are easy to compare. Moreover, the questionnaire is easy to replicate to ensure reliability (McLeod, 2023). However, there are also drawbacks, such as the potential for social desirability bias. This is when the participants act in a way or provide answers they believe will be viewed favourably by others, rather than being completely honest, or because the topic is sensitive and they fear their opinions or sensitive information given will be traced back to them (Lietz, 2010). Another concern is the low rate of return of completed surveys leads to possible bias due to non-response, which can be difficult to evaluate effectively. Furthermore, the questionnaire structure is inflexible, making it impossible to change the strategy after distribution. Ambiguous responses or omissions hinder data interpretation, making it difficult to draw accurate conclusions from the survey results (Dalitso Kuphanga, 2024). This showcases a need to consider these difficulties and to find ways to mitigate them, such as ensuring anonymity and fully informed consent (Deepika Badampudi *et al.*, 2022).

I distributed my questionnaire to 5 teachers and supported 5 pupils in my class as they completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire had a front page detailing the purpose of the questionnaire, stating that their answers would remain confidential and would be recorded under a number to provide anonymity. For the pupils, I explained this in a child-friendly way before supporting them as they answered the questions. While the questionnaires asked the same questions, one was child-friendly for the pupils, however, both questionnaires included Likert scales, multiple-choice questions and long answers. I also included a combination of open and closed questions as I planned to use the long answers to determine the two teachers that I was going to interview further (Taherdoost, 2019).

Interviews are one of the most common ways to collect data. Interviews help to examine complicated ideas and experiences by offering a better grasp of the participants' perspectives. They provide an opportunity to investigate the underlying reasons for preferences and behaviours, shedding light on different ways of thinking (Shazia

Jamshed, 2014). This is because they provide an opportunity for participants to express, in their own words, how they perceive and comprehend the world around them. Additionally, interviews allow for follow-up questions and clarification, enabling researchers to delve deeper into the participants' responses. This interactive process can lead to rich and detailed data that may not be captured through other methods of data collection (Knott *et al.*, 2022).

There are many advantages to interviews. In comparison to questionnaires, they are far more flexible, as they can be set up as an unstructured or semi-structured interview. Both of these approaches allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions and gauge nonverbal communication. However, a semi-structured interview allows data to be compared between different participants to identify patterns and themes, as well as data collected through other methods, such as a questionnaire. The response rate is also much higher than that of a questionnaire (Opdenakker, 2006, Alshenqeeti, 2014). On the other hand, interviews can have drawbacks. Interviews make it harder to ensure anonymity, as participants' voices and identities are revealed. Additionally, interviews can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, especially when transcribing and analysing the data from a large sample size. There is also an increased risk of unconscious bias. This is when the personal opinions or beliefs of the researcher influence the interpretation of the data collected. This can lead to inaccurate conclusions and hinder the overall validity of the research findings (Opdenakker, 2006, Fox, 2006, Alshenqeeti, 2014, Seale, 2018).

I planned to ask two of the teachers who had completed my questionnaire if I might interview them further to better understand their perspectives on utilising rewards vs. no rewards in a behaviour policy. I opted to employ a semi-structured interview so that I could ask pre-planned questions that related to their earlier answers in the questionnaire while still having the option to elaborate on their responses and offer clarifying questions. Furthermore, this would allow me to compare and analyse the responses more clearly. As these interviews would be conducted on school grounds and the teachers would be giving their opinions of school policy, there was potential that this could affect the success of the interview as they may have felt unable to share their true opinions. However, when I attempted to obtain approval from the teachers to proceed with an interview, they declined claiming they were too busy to commit time to the research and interview.

Data Analysis

I aimed to have 5 teachers and 5 pupils take part in their corresponding questionnaires. 22 teachers in my placement school were all given access to the questionnaire by posting a QR code for them to scan for access on the staff room tables and having my

class mentor email it out to the staff. Of the 22 teachers, 5 responded to the questionnaire. While this is a low response rate, I understand that teachers are busy preparing for the end of the year as they go on residentials and plan concerts for the children and therefore have very little time. This is also why the teachers I approached concerning a further interview did not consent as they did not have time for this. Perhaps I could have presented them with the questions I had thought of before asking them to demonstrate that it was a brief interview. This is something I will be mindful of in future. With regards to the children, I sent out 6 consent forms to parents and received 5 back. These 5 children also provided verbal consent before taking part in the questionnaire. I was quite pleased with this response rate.

My questionnaire produced a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Thus, for quantitative data, I have created visual representations of my data using graphs and charts. By seeing the data in one place I am able to identify patterns, trends, and relationships within the data; and can therefore draw conclusions. For the qualitative data collected, I have used thematic analysis. To do this I read the responses several times to fully comprehend them. I then reviewed each response and coded it, grouping thoughts or concepts that were similar. Throughout this process, themes that represent recurring patterns in the data surfaced. These topics will be developed and clarified, providing me insight into the teacher and pupil viewpoints, experiences, and attitudes towards behaviour policies (Norris, 2017, Willig and Rogers, 2017).

The thematic analysis gives you both freedom and depth, so you can look into the participants' thoughts and feelings. Through research, the method makes it easier to find themes you didn't expect and to fully understand what they mean. However, researcher subjectivity in coding and interpretation may induce bias, thus the researcher must be highly reflective. Other problems are that analysis is time-consuming and there is a chance of oversimplifying difficult data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations

When conducting my research, ethical considerations regarding confidentiality, anonymity and consent needed to be thought through carefully and considered paramount.

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality allows researchers to protect the privacy of participants and allows them the freedom to share their opinions in a safe way; which is especially important within case study research (Hoft, 2021). As my participants were sharing their opinions on the behaviour policy within their workplace, it was important that this was kept confidential and they felt safe enough to express this without fear of it negatively impacting their work life. This can be done by ensuring that the participants do not provide any identifiable information about themselves and by instead presenting

their data under a fake name or number. I will be presenting mine as “Teacher 1” or “Pupil 3” etc. Furthermore, trust is required in a researcher-participant relationship for this to succeed. Therefore, the participants must understand that every effort will be made to protect them and they feel able to give consent to take part in research (Wiles *et al.*, 2006, Novak, 2014,)

Consent was obtained from the teachers by providing an information sheet on the first page of the online questionnaire. This detailed the purpose of the study, stated that by continuing with the questionnaire they are consenting to take part and provided my contact details should they have any questions or wish to withdraw at any time. To ensure consent for the children in my class to take part, I sent a similar consent form home for parents to sign along with a section for the children to sign. Obtaining informed consent from parents or guardians is critical to gaining students' assent. For minors, assent is required in addition to parental approval. This includes testing for understanding, providing an age-appropriate overview of the study, and allowing them to express any questions or concerns. This ensures their understanding of voluntary participation and their right to decline involvement (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986, Flory & Emanuel, 2004, David *et al.*, 2001, GOV.UK, 2023).

In general, securing informed consent, protecting anonymity, and maintaining confidentiality are crucial ethical factors in my study. By following these guidelines, and that of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Ethics Committee, I show that I am dedicated to ethically doing research and that I put my participants' rights and well-being first at all times during the project.

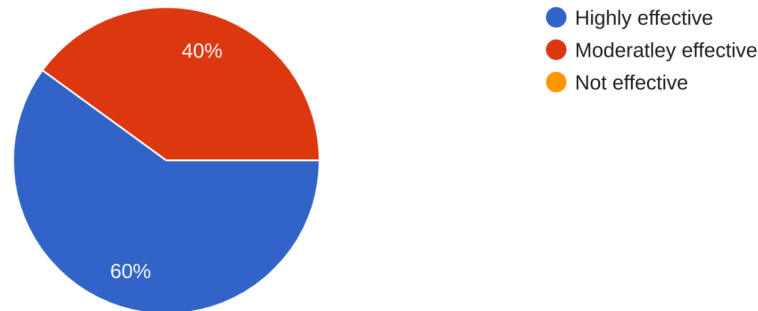
Discussion

Teachers perceptions

Theme 1:

How effective do you believe the current rewards-based policy is in promoting positive behaviour among students?

5 responses



Firstly, we can see that 60% agreed that the rewards-based behaviour policy at my placement school was highly effective. This school typically uses stickers, dojo points, and certificates to incentivise good behaviour and attendance. As previously mentioned in the literature review, rewards for good behaviour are expected in UK schools (Payne, 2015). Therefore, I find it interesting that 2 out of 5 participants only found it moderately effective.

Theme 2: What are the strengths and limitations of the current rewards-based behaviour policy?

4 out of the 5 participants identified that positive reinforcement and child-friendly communication help the children understand expectations and have something to work towards. However, when asked about the limitations or challenges, 4 out of 5 participants also identified that it does not work for all children. There were many reasons given for this, such as children care less when they get older, they are not incentivised by the rewards on offer, the rewards are not used consistently enough through the school or children in the specialist teaching facility are not bothered by it. Due to my small sample size, I do not have enough data to conclude the reasoning behind why rewards do not work for all children, however, further research should be done to better understand this.

Theme 3: What are your thoughts on the concept of a no-rewards behaviour policy?

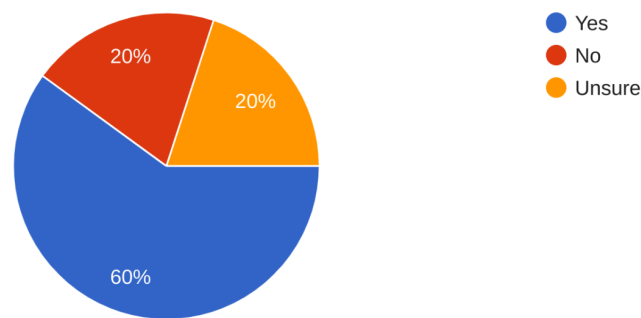
The response to this question was mixed, however, it was clear that the teachers were interested and could see the benefits of no rewards. One participant stated that they already have removed many rewards from their classroom, and instead try to teach the children to identify how proud they are of themselves. They gave the example of getting

100% on their spelling test and using their happiness as their reward. Other responses were able to see that there could be room for both rewards and intrinsic motivation where the class comes together as a community to encourage rather than focus on the individual. One said it would better prepare them for life whereas another said they thought behaviour would deteriorate as they have nothing to work towards. However, we have already seen from the literature that a child's intrinsic desire to learn and grow is more than enough to encourage them to do the right thing if encouraged by their teachers (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972).

Theme 4:

Do you believe a no-rewards behaviour policy would be effective in promoting positive behaviour among students?

5 responses



Finally, when asked if no rewards would be effective, 60% said they thought it would be effective, 20% said they were unsure and 20% said no. Although the sample is small, it is encouraging to see that over half of the participants were encouraged by the thought of encouraging intrinsic motivation within the children.

Pupils perceptions

Theme 1: What is your favourite and least favourite thing about getting stickers and points for good behaviour?

In response to the question, four out of five children praised the ability to redeem their accumulated points for treats from the treat box after they reached 20 points. They indicated satisfaction with this approach, indicating that it adds enjoyment to their day, makes them happy, and contributes to their overall well-being. This feedback emphasises the motivating nature of rewards, as children get delight and excitement

from the physical incentives supplied by the behaviour system. However, it should be noted that 3 of these children are 6 and 2 are 7. Perhaps their opinions would change if they were older. However, 2 children said they found it hard when other children received a sticker or a reward instead of them, 1 said it was hard if they got taken away and another said they did not like it if someone naughty got one because they felt they always did the right thing and were not always recognised. This is something my mentor has mentioned she fears: rewarding the good children for being good, rewarding the difficult children when they do something good, and missing all the children in the middle.

Theme 2:

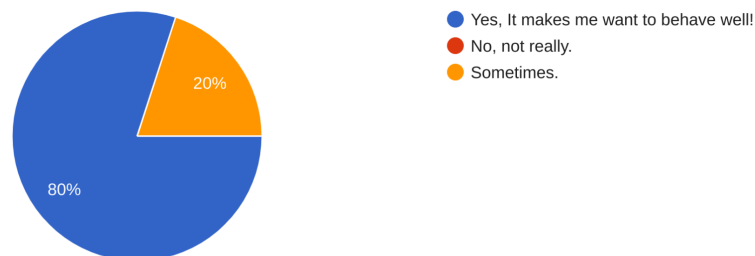
Do you like the way we get stickers and points for good behaviour in class?

5 responses



When you get stickers and points, does it make you want to behave well in class?

5 responses



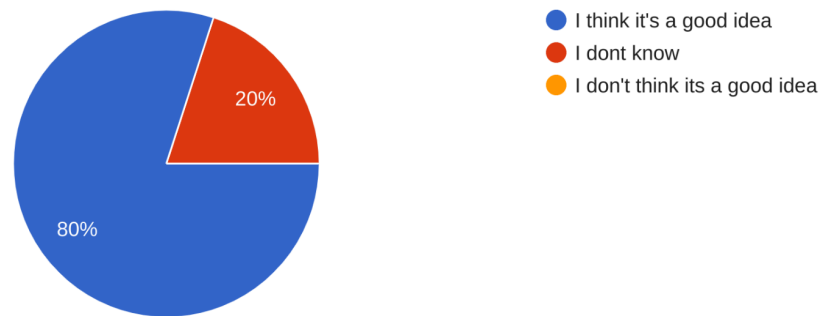
100% of the participants stated that they liked receiving points and stickers for behaving well in class. This implies that participants have a strong preference for tangible incentives as a form of reinforcement. Furthermore, 80% of respondents stated that these incentives prompted them to engage in positive behaviour, implying that rewards have an obvious effect on student behaviour. However, 20% of participants stated that, while they valued rewards, they were occasionally beneficial in encouraging good behaviour. This indicates a varied attitude among a minority of participants, showing

variations in the success of reward-based behaviour strategies at a young age. Perhaps this becomes more varied as they get older.

Theme 3:

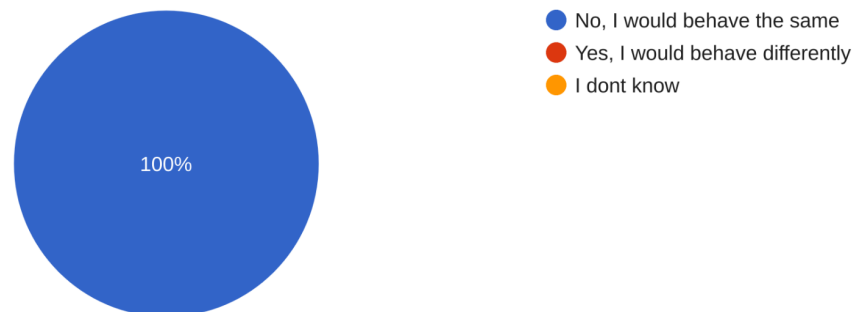
What do you think about the idea of being good without getting stickers and points?

5 responses



Do you think you would behave differently if we didn't get stickers and points?

5 responses



Finally, 80% of the children thought it was a good idea to be good even though they did not get any rewards and 100% of children said they would still behave the same even if they did not receive stickers or points. This unanimity highlights the persistence of their commitment to positive behaviour, as well as the significance of intrinsic incentives and values in shaping their actions. However, could this be because they are still young enough to not have received enough rewards to diminish their intrinsic motivation to do the right thing?

Conclusions

To conclude, although 40% of teachers believe incentives are only somewhat effective, 60% firmly feel that they are typically effective. Positive reinforcement and straightforward communication are strengths, but 80% of respondents also mention drawbacks including inconsistent results and declining effectiveness with age. Although children like material prizes, questions about recognition and fairness surface, particularly with older pupils. Although incentives encourage positive behaviour, 20% of students periodically question their effectiveness. The majority show an eagerness to behave well even in the absence of rewards, suggesting intrinsic drive. However, the complexity of behaviour management in schools is highlighted by age-related variations and the balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, calling for continued study and careful policy development.

Furthermore, this study has limitations due to a lack of time and resources. Due to only having access to one year group to take part, I do not believe these results can be generalised to different age groups within a school. Further research should take place with children from different year groups and different schools to make the results more reliable. Furthermore, I was unable to interview the teachers in the school due to their lack of time. This meant that I was unable to delve further into their perceptions of their policies and their opinions of facilitating intrinsic motivation. Further research should aim to delve deeper into this topic to see the benefits and drawbacks of rewards-based behaviour policies compared with no-rewards-based behaviour policies.

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