



TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF REWARD SYSTEMS AS A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

The study examined teachers' perceptions of the use of reward systems as a teaching approach for children with autism in special education classrooms. The study explored teachers' views on the role and importance of reward systems; the strategies they use to promote positive behavior; the factors they consider when selecting rewards; the challenges they experience during implementation; and the perceived effects of reward systems on learners' behavioral, social, and emotional development. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design and collected teachers' lived experiences using semi-structured interviews, with the data processed thematically. It was found that teachers perceived reward systems as useful tools that helped promote positive behavior, engagement, self-motivation, and independence. Reinforcement practice depended upon the suitability and individual suitability of students' talents, capabilities, skills, developmental stages, behavioral targets, and sensory preferences. Teachers reported using various forms of reinforcement (e.g., behavior-specific praise, verbal affirmation, physical objects, tangible, token, and privilege rewards, sensory stimuli) in the routines and targeted behavior. Choosing the type of reward used was the product of student observation, assessment, student choice, discussions with parents and relevant support staff, prevailing circumstances, and legal and policy constraints. The limitations teachers experienced in providing individualized reinforcers were: maintenance of consistency, student Awareness of the reward, fairness, resourcefulness, learner generalization, and student peer attitudes toward the reward. Teachers responded to this by teaching specific standards, establishing and regulating routines, performing observations, collaborating, and improving practice. The majority of reviewers regarded incentive systems as advantageous for social-emotional growth because they promote social engagement, confidence-building, self-control, and self-reliance, which eventually lead to intrinsic drive. From these findings, our study has identified and developed an adaptable data-driven model for designing and modifying individual reward systems: the C.A.R.E. Loop Model. They also advocate for continued professional growth, continuous assessment, ongoing communication, and the use of mixed methodologies to investigate subjective opinions alongside systematic behavioral assessment.

KEYWORDS: Autism; Reward Systems; Positive Reinforcement; Special Education; Teacher Perspectives; Behavioral Development; Intrinsic Motivation; C.A.R.E. Loop Model

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

In special education, rewards are often employed to reinforce acceptable behavior, increase motivation to respond, and foster classroom involvement of students with autism. Rewards can include positive verbal feedback, stickers, tokens, points, access to preferred activities or privileges, etc. Recent evidence demonstrates that token economy interventions are effective in improving target behaviors in general and special education settings (Kim et al., 2022).

Positive behavior support (PBS) for students with autism, which stresses proactive, tailored, and constructive approaches to difficult behaviors, is also compatible with positive reinforcement. PBS treatments help lessen harmful behaviors and encourage appropriate alternative behaviors among children and young people with developmental impairments in special education settings, according to a systematic study (Beqiraj et al., 2022). Additionally, Mestari et al. (2024) emphasized the significance of teachers' experiences in implementing PBS for autistic children, including the influence of flexibility, teamwork, and the classroom atmosphere.

Although behavioral interventions are gaining research support, more is needed to understand SPED teachers' views on and use of reward systems in their classrooms, particularly in the Philippine setting. This study consequently analyzes the lived experiences and perspectives of SPED instructors in Misamis Oriental regarding the implementation of reward systems as a teaching technique for learners with autism, including their perceived benefits, obstacles, and contextual concerns.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The study aims to seek an understanding of teachers' perspectives on the use of reward systems for children with special needs, particularly those identified as with autism.

The central question guiding this inquiry is: How do Special Education (SPED) teachers perceive and experience the use of reward systems as a teaching strategy for learners with autism?

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:



1. What are teachers' understanding of the role and value of reward systems used to learners with autism in their classrooms?
2. Which reward systems and what kind of strategies do teachers use to control positive behavior in learners with autism?
3. What are the factors that determines which rewards are chosen by, or used by, teachers to meet the behavioral needs of learners with autism?
4. What problems do teachers face when applying reward system in learners with autism, and how do they address these problems?
5. What is the teacher's perspective on the influence of reward systems to learners with autism, on behavioral, social and emotional development?
6. Based on teachers' narratives, what conceptual model may be developed to improve the use of reward systems in special education classrooms?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES AND STUDIES

Children with special needs can be positively influenced by reward systems, which function as a behavior Management intervention designed to increase the level of the target behavior, as well as student participation and motivation. While investigating token economy procedures for children with special needs in an in-class intervention setting, Tan et al. (2022) concluded that token economies had clear potential to promote prosocial behavior and student motivation. Additional studies were conducted to examine token economy procedures for instructional and clinical settings: Fernandez et al. (2023) discovered that "systematic delivery of reinforcement procedures combined with tokens of course-varying amounts worked."

Reinforcement must be tailored, particularly for learners with autism. Lill et al. (2021) highlighted the need for a stimulus preference assessment to identify reinforcers that are meaningful and effective for individual learners. Morris and Vollmer (2021) observed that, in line with this view, social engagement might function as a reinforcer for some children with autism, but could be neutral or ineffective for others, thereby emphasizing the importance of individual preferences in the selection of rewards. Mestari et al. (2024) further highlighted the significance of flexibility, teamwork, and contextual assistance in providing positive behavior support for children with autism.

Teacher methods and classroom environment may affect the successful application of reward systems. Behavioral classroom interventions can be influenced by environmental constraints, conflicting demands, and teacher-related factors (Lawson et al., 2022). Heiniger et al. (2022) also emphasized the value of systematic reinforcement, fading, generalization, and the growing use of natural reinforcement for learner independence. Kim et al. (2022) also identified beneficial impacts of token economy practices in K-5 educational contexts, while Begiraj et al. (2022) found support for positive behavioral interventions for children and young people with developmental disabilities in special education contexts.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research methodology within an interpretative paradigm to analyze the lived experiences of Special Education (SPED) teachers regarding the use of reward systems with learners with autism. Phenomenological research is ideal for studying how people experience and make sense of a phenomenon within their social and educational environments (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The topic examined in this study was the lived experiences of teachers regarding the use of reward systems to promote positive conduct among learners with autism. Semi-structured interviews and a checklist of incentive system practices and implementation obstacles were used to collect data. This research, using a qualitative method, i.e., Thematic Analysis, identified general themes and meanings from participants' narratives. Principles of research were ethically concerned, in that informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and dignity of human participants and privacy were respected at each stage of research process. The phenomenological method enabled the research to investigate teachers' experiences and meaning-making regarding the implementation of reward systems in special education classes.

Selection of Participants / Co-participants

Criterion purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience using reward systems with learners with autism. These participants were 10 Special Education (SPED) teachers who teach in public elementary schools in Misamis Oriental, Philippines. In order to ensure that these participants can give information-rich data about the research phenomenon, the following criteria were set: (a) currently teaching as SPED teacher in a public elementary school in Misamis Oriental; (b) has at least five years of teaching experience; (c) holds a Teacher III or Master Teacher designation; (d) ages 25 to 50 years old; and (e) has undergone professional development seminars on special education, reward system, or managing learners with autism. Criterion-based purposive sampling is appropriate to use when participants are selected based on characteristics predetermined by the researcher in relation to the research phenomenon (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Teachers who met all specified criteria were invited to participate in the research study, but only those who agreed voluntarily were included as participants. They were also made aware that they had the right not to participate or to discontinue with the study.

Data Generation Methods

Before data were collected, participants were approached, and their consent to participate was received. They were made aware of the purpose of the study, the methods used, how information would be stored and kept secure, how data would be collected (voluntarily), and the option to leave the study. Two online focus groups were set up to gather data from them on two dates in November 2025; 5 teachers were present. The participants' experiences, opinions, practices, and challenges of the usage of reward systems with autistic learners were gathered using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule was validated by specialists. These



interviews were recorded with participants' approval and subsequently transcribed word-for-word.

Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

Data was collected, compiled, and interpreted by the primary researcher. In these methods the researcher also acted as an interviewer which established trust among participants and provided the opportunity for the researcher to monitor online focus group interviews and to allow participants to present their lived experiences more spontaneously. Reflection was an integral part of this process through a diary maintained by the researcher for assumptions, observations and choices made during the study, data collection, and interpretation. No further meanings were imposed by the researcher; the researcher was mindful of the influence of their own viewpoints on data interpretation. This was in the spirit of the aim of phenomenology: to study an issue from participants' lived perspectives (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Data Transcription and Management

The researcher recorded the focus group interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Participants were told in advance that the discussion would be taped and that it would be with their permission. The transcriptions are checked against the interview tapes to ensure they capture all that was said. It is assumed pseudonyms will obscure participants' identities as all names have been removed. A file was set up, and the digitally recorded voices and transcripts, along with the codes and research documents, were organized and securely stored with limited access for the researcher. The recordings and related documentation were kept in accordance with the ethics of this study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis was used in this study to discover themes and meanings in the participants' stories. The researcher first became acquainted with the data by rereading the transcripts and manually coding individual statements relevant to the research themes. Codes that appeared to be relevant to each other were compared, grouped into categories, and then built into main themes and sub-themes. The researcher went back through the transcripts with the themes to make sure they fitted with the participants' accounts and were consistent.

Themes were then discussed in reference to the questions and relevant literature. This followed a comprehensive approach to conducting thematic analysis that was systematically coded, involved interpretation, and ensured coherence between the data and the final themes (Braun & Clark, 2021).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To establish the study's rigor, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were assessed. To strengthen credibility, member verification was used, in which participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Peer debriefing was conducted as an independent perspective on coding and emergent themes. The reliability of the results was strengthened by maintaining an organized record of the procedures for data collection and analysis. Reflexive documentation was employed to increase confirmability, as was

the assessment of discrepant evidence to the prevailing themes. Extensive descriptions of the participants, the research environment, and the phenomenon of interest aided transferability. An external assessment of the study process was also conducted to evaluate the consistency among the research questions, data, analysis, and interpretations.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the participants' accounts generated 14 themes describing how teachers select, implement, and evaluate reward systems for learners with autism. These themes converged into four broader dimensions: **individualized reinforcement, structured implementation, behavioral and social-emotional development, and progression toward independence.**

Individualized Reinforcement

The teachers also noted that rewards would be much more significant to learners if they matched their preferences and interests and took into account learners' abilities and how people perceive information through their senses. Participant 1 explained, *"I always observe what makes each child excited or calm. Some learners like visual things, such as stickers or stars, while others prefer hugs or claps."* Participant 7 similarly noted, *"I base the rewards on the child's interests. If a learner loves music, I let them choose a song or lead a dance as a reward for good behavior."*

From the responses received, it seems that in general, teachers believed that the decision of what type of reinforcers to use was a learner-centered rather than 'one-off' process, and again supports Lill et al. (2021), they reported that the assessment of stimulus preferences is the most valuable approach to determining those stimuli with potential reinforcing properties.

Structured and Consistent Implementation

Participants additionally expressed that explicit expectations, reliable reinforcers, and changes to reinforcers were crucial. Participant 2 stated, *"They play a supportive role in guiding behavior, not controlling it. I see rewards as encouragement rather than manipulation."* Participant 1 further explained, *"Rewards are a good starting point to shape desirable behaviors. Over time, I fade them out and replace them with natural reinforcement like praise."*

From these reports, it is clear that teachers perceived rewards as controlled instructional prompts rather than simply as a means of reinforcing a behavior. If tokens were delivered systematically and used effectively with fading, then teachers will not become over-reliant on the external reinforcer. This confirms the findings of Heiniger et al. (2022), which described the aspects necessary for systemic implementation, generalization, fading, and the increase in more naturalized reinforcements.

Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Development

Teachers reported increased work involvement and improved self-regulation, communication, collaboration, and peer interaction. Participant 2 observed, *"One child used to*



have frequent meltdowns during transitions. With the reward system, he now waits patiently and even helps others follow the routine." Participant 10 added, "Overall, behavioral and social interaction improvements are visible. Some children initiate greetings or requests independently, which they rarely did before."

The observations offer insight into the possibility that reward systems might even assist wider adaptation developments by coupling reinforcers with functional and social goals. Such a result aligns with Kim et al. (2022), who systematically reviewed and found that Token economies in K-5 schooling had benefits, and with Beqiraj et al. (2022), who showed empirical support for positive behavioral support in children with developmental disabilities.

Progression Toward Independence

The teachers' realization that rewards should progressively become less required as students achieve self-regulation was a noteworthy discovery. "Some behaviors stop if the reward is removed, but others, like sharing or waiting, continue because the child begins to understand why it is important," participant 8. "At first, rewards create short-term motivation, but over time, children internalize routines and expectations, which encourages longer-term good behavior," participant 2.

This result suggests that internalized positive behavior progresses from external incentives. Teachers saw the development of self-control, independence, and consistent positive behavior as the ultimate goal rather than a lifelong reliance on rewards. Heiniger et al. (2022) emphasized fading reinforcement systems to promote independence and more organic sources of motivation, which aligns with this.

Intervention Model Developed to Improve the Use of Reward Systems in Special Education Classrooms Based on Teachers' Narratives

The study established the C.A.R.E. Loop Model (Contextualized, Adaptive, Reinforcing, and Evolving Reward System for Learners with Autism) based on teachers' narratives. This approach presents an effective system for designing, teaching, evaluating, and modifying individual reward systems within special education. Guiding principles of the system, such as "learner-centered evaluation, consistent delivery, collaboration, ethical application, and transition to self-control," must be incorporated.

I. Rationale

Teachers reported that incentive arrangements are most effective when individualized, valuable, dependable, and aligned with learner advancement. With respect to rewards, teachers were aware that they were considering individual learners' needs for interests, sensory stimuli, behavioral style, communication abilities, and behaviors. Teachers reported that systematic reinforcement, routines, prompt feedback, home-school and support staff liaison were critical.

But teachers also acknowledged the limitations of extrinsic rewards in achieving permanent behavioral change. Their narratives underscored the need for a gradual fade of physical rewards and a strengthening of natural and intrinsic reinforcement as learners achieve self-regulation and independence. Thus, the C.A.R.E. Loop Model was established to provide a methodical yet flexible approach to translating teachers' experiences into classroom practice.

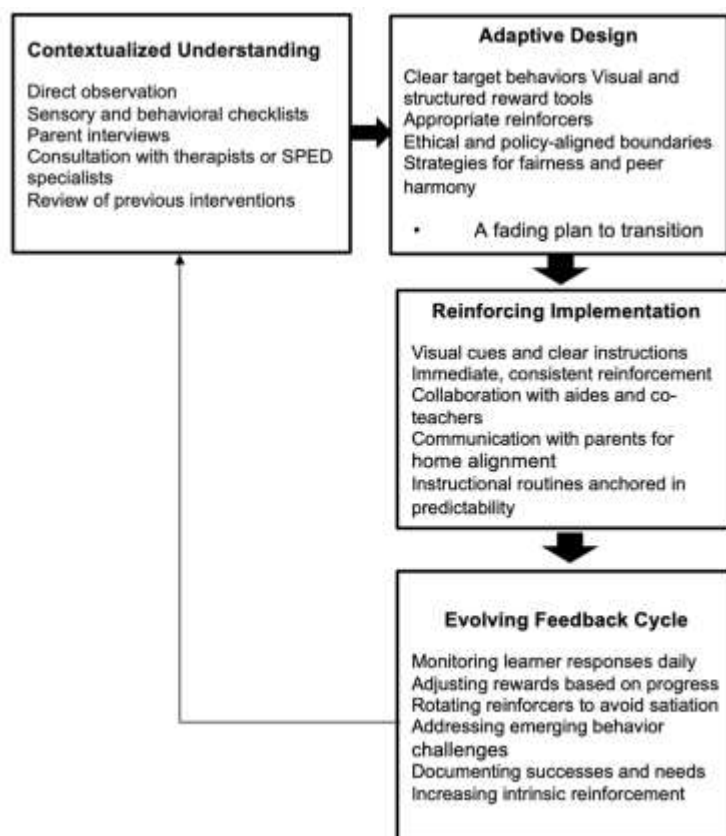
II. Objectives

The C.A.R.E. Loop Model aims to:

- identify individual learner characteristics relevant to reinforcement;
- develop individualized and appropriate reward systems;
- promote consistent and collaborative implementation;
- monitor and adapt reinforcement according to learner progress; and
- facilitate the transition from external reinforcement to self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and independence.



III. The C.A.R.E. Loop Model



1. Contextualized Understanding.

Teachers use observations of learners to determine learners' interests, sensory needs, communication styles, behaviors, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Checklists, discussions with parents, consultation with specialists, and existing records of interventions are utilized.

2. Adaptive Design.

The teachers identify target behaviors and select a plan to reward appropriately with intangible, social, sensory, activity, or privilege reinforcers. There are also design considerations for visual supports, equity and ethical practice, and a prompt to fade the reward gradually.

3. Reinforcing Implementation.

The reward system is put in place with established expectations, visual schedules/cues, consistent structure, positive and prompt reinforcement, encouragement of communication, and team cooperation among teachers, aides, special education services, and parents.

4. Evolving Feedback Cycle.

Feedback from responses is monitored, records are kept, reinforcers are changed/rotated, learners' needs are addressed, and there is a gradual introduction of more natural and intrinsic reinforcement. This then allows for the process to repeat with new contextualization, making it a cycle.

behavior, engagement, motivation, and autonomy in learners with autism. Relevant and consistent, targeted reinforcement that depended on learners' preferred items, demands, sensory needs, and abilities was identified as effective. Teachers adapted or selected rewards and used them alongside planned reinforcement to ensure learner engagement, encourage specific behaviors, and foster lasting self-motivation. Factors that influenced reward selection were: observations, learner assessment and choice, collaboration with parents and other staff, constraints of settings, and policy-related issues (including Ethical factors) in relation to the subject. However, teachers reported issues with consistency, fairness, resource availability, and the maintenance of individualization of reinforcement across varied classroom contexts. These issues were handled with defined routines, clear expectations, collaboration, monitoring, and adaptive incentive strategies. In general, incentive systems were positively supported as promoting behavior and social and emotional learning (specifically self-regulation, social interaction, confidence, and independence). These findings were also foundational for creating the C.A.R.E. Loop Model (Contextualized, Adaptive, Reinforcing, and Evolving Reward System for Learners with Autism)-a practical, data-driven framework to assist teachers in planning, executing, measuring the effect of, and revising reward systems as the child develops.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

Results showed that teachers thought the system could be an effective enabling tool for promoting the desired

Conclusions

In conclusion, it was determined that reward systems could serve as supportive mechanisms for autistic students, increasing positive behaviors, learning, self-regulation, and



independence, and gradually promoting intrinsic motivation. These reward systems, consisting of all types of consequences such as verbal rewards (as part of verbal rewards or behavior specific praise), tangibles, sensory rewards, tokens, and privileges were implemented with different learning children through all of their routine interactions and through explicit goals and strategies as guided by both teacher's professional knowledge and the students own personal preferences, sensory demands, development, behavioral needs, and how they respond to different kinds of reinforcing consequences. Despite difficulties with consistent administration, transferring behavior to the natural environment, peer response/consideration, and the appropriate delivery of desired reinforcers, these are monitored with vigilance, adjustments, and communication with parents and therapists, and supported by a more diverse collection of motivating consequences that differ based on individual learning needs. In essence, teachers viewed the reward systems as a facilitative tool for students' social-emotional development that decreases anxiety, fosters self-assurance, and allows behavior that can be interpreted as evidence of increased self-sufficiency.

Recommendations

In light of the results and conclusions, the following can be recommended: Schools/teachers should use reinforcement systems for students with autism based on the individual behavioral, developmental, sensory, and motivational characteristics of each student, and these should be implemented methodically, individually, and in collaboration.

The ability to achieve sustained and appropriate behavior change through the development of internal motivation can best be achieved through long-term professional development for the teacher, based on research on the selection, use, assessment, and fading of reinforcers.

The interests, sensory responses, and behavior of individuals with autism need to be assessed routinely, with the involvement of parents and therapists, to improve reinforcement systems. Schools should provide greater access to relevant resources and flexible supports. The support that educational settings may provide can help students and educators address concerns related to appropriate reinforcer use, generalization, consistency, and implementation in the classroom. The teaching of incentive systems should be geared toward developing proper conduct, including social interaction, emotional abilities, self-initiation, and independent learning.

Future research may help gather qualitative data on educators' and learners' perceptions and quantitative data on behavioral outcomes through a mixed-methods approach.

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