

The Double-Edged Sword: A Study of the Role of Reward and Punishment in Student Learning at the Primary Level

Dr. Muhammad Naqeeb ul Khalil Shaheen

naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Kotli AJ&K, Pakistan

Mahnoor Hussain

mahnoorhussain2375@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kotli AJ&K, Pakistan

Aftab Hussain Shah

aftabhussainshah159@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kotli AJ&K, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Dr. Muhammad Naqeeb ul Khalil Shaheen naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com

Received: 27-10-2025

Revised: 11-11-2025

Accepted: 25-11-2025

Published: 10-12-2025

ABSTRACT

Behavioral reinforcement techniques in early childhood education have been a hot topic for educators for a long time. According to this quantitative survey research, reward and punishment have an impact on student learning behavior at the primary school level in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi. The research considered two primary constructs: a positive effect of rewards on motivation and academic engagement, and two sides of punishment (corrective and negative) influencing student discipline and psychological well-being. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population of the study were 958 primary school teachers of Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi. Through a simple random sampling technique, 315 teachers were picked to be the sample. A 24-item five-point Likert scale questionnaire was designed and it was validated by education experts. Reliability was verified by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.80$). The researchers personally collected the data, which was then analyzed by means of frequency, percentage, and mean scores. Findings revealed that most teachers were of the opinion that rewards enable students to develop a positive attitude towards learning (Mean=4.02) and that they complete homework and projects with pleasure (Mean=4.01). In connection with the first research question, the mean score for the reward factor was 3.81, thereby validating the strong positive influence of reward in student motivation and engagement. In connection with the second research question, teachers were of the opinion that punishment changes student behavior and develops discipline (Mean=3.98); however, they at the same time admitted its negative side effects such as students feeling inferior and becoming more aggressive (Mean=4.11). The paper infers that even though both instruments are quite common, reward-based approaches have a more stable positive link with students' motivation and well-being, whereas punishment entails substantial risks of negative social consequences. The propositions highlight giving precedence to positive reinforcement and praise over punitive measures, equipping teachers with skills in non-corporal classroom management techniques, and reinforcing policy against abusive disciplinary practices.

Keywords: Reward, Punishment, Student Motivation, Primary Education, Classroom Management.

INTRODUCTION

The foundation of continuing education is set in the primary school classroom. It is at this stage that a child's perception of schooling, relation with authority, and self-discipline get mostly influenced by the teacher's classroom environment and the behavior management techniques they use. Out of the many strategies, the systems of reward and punishment are the most common yet the most disputable ones.

Reward and punishment are the basic elements of operant conditioning that work as extrinsic motivators to modify our behavior (Skinner, 1953). In schools, rewards are the things given to a child after they show desirable behavior and it increases the chances of the child behaving in the same way in future. On the other hand, punishments are meant to decrease the chances of a child behaving in an undesirable way. Even though there is a large body of literature in neuroscience that discusses the effects of positive and negative feedback on decision-making and motor learning (Guitart-Masip et al., 2012), the real-life application of these results in the classrooms which are at the crossroads of rural and urban such as Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi, call for a detailed local study.

The region's educational system has long emphasized compliance and memorization to the point where it sometimes mistakes severity for efficiency. Yet, modern psychology education has found that internal motivation is a much stronger determinant of persistence in learning without giving up due to fear of punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research by Miller, Ferguson, and Simpson (1998) showed that although parents and their children unanimously found school rewards as an effective measure, they were significantly less in favor of employing punishment or sanctions.

Educational provision in Rawalpindi district, which includes the historically significant headquarters of Kallar Syedan, caters to the educational needs of a very mixed population made up of long-established rural residents and newly settled suburban families. It becomes a matter of paramount importance to understand the most effective and humane means of encouraging learning in this changing academic scene. Besides occasional rewards like verbal appreciation, stickers, or small gifts, graduations, detentions, and other punishments are equally on offer. The present research intends to connect the psychological theories at a global level with the socio-cultural elements of the schools in Kallar Syedan. It is focused on finding out not only the extent of the deployment of these two methods but also what teachers' opinions are about the influence of these methods on both children's learning and their psychological growth.

Statement of the Problem

Primary education in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi plays a crucial role in student retention as well as in ensuring basic literacy skills. One of the common problems in managing classrooms is that teachers sometimes resort to corporal punishments, most often because they have large classes and are not trained in other means. There is a very real dilemma between the need for order in the classrooms and the fact that punishing may cause anxiety, students not wanting to come to school, or even aggression. On the other hand, if students receive too many material rewards, they might lose their inherent interest in learning. This is why the researchers carried out this study in order to find out exactly how reward and punishment influence students' learning behavior at the primary level in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi environment, according to their teachers' perspective.

Objectives of the Study

The study pursued the following objectives:

1. To explore the role of reward in enhancing student motivation and academic engagement at primary schools in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi.
2. To determine the perceived importance and negative consequences of punishment on student learning behavior at primary schools in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the role of reward in fostering positive learning behavior among primary students in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi?
2. What is the perceived impact of punishment on student discipline and psychological safety at the primary level in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi?

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Reward as a Pedagogical Tool

Rewards are qualitative strategies that serve to recognize and motivate desirable student behaviors, which can include anything from a student showing determination in their studies to following school regulations. For example, in the setting of a classroom, this could be done via verbal commendation, presenting small gifts, or granting special privileges. Bear (2010) in his research indicated that the most important aspects of reinforcement are that it should be given immediately, based on the specific behavior, and not be a way to bribe a child for previous misbehavior.

On the flip side, articles are cautioning about the detrimental impact of the so-called undermining effect. In fact, the pivotal meta-study by Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) unveiled that the enjoyment of tasks definitely takes a hit due to the offering of extrinsic rewards. On the other hand, verbal praise that is a surprise and from the heart is in most cases a booster of intrinsic motivation as well as the feeling of competence (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). When it comes to primary school, which is a critical period for developing positive vibes towards reading and math, the equilibrium is very fragile. Unlike CAMERON and PIERCE (1994) who pretty much state that while, on the one hand, rewards could have a negative effect on a person's inborn motivation for a task that already interests him the incentives, on the other hand, will still be helpful for getting the students to do the tasks they would definitely not do if it depended solely on their will without offering them any kind of external reward.

Punishment: Corrective Measure or Harmful Stimulus

By punishment is meant the introduction of an unpleasant stimulus or, on the contrary, taking away a pleasant thing in connection with a person's wrongdoing. Ideally, one of the highest aims of punishing

a pupil would be the elimination of the wrong conduct without hurting the student's self-esteem (Maag, 2001).

On the other hand, these harsh effects have been pointed out extensively. In particular, the groundbreaking meta-analysis by Gershoff (2002) results in the conclusion that physical punishment is quite closely linked to an upsurge of aggression, delinquent, and antisocial behaviours. Besides, further longitudinal studies by Lansford et al. (2009) show that children who live in punitive family settings have more externalizing problems in different cultures. As for Pakistani primary schools, Nawaz and Rehman (2021) discovered that the students who are subjected their anxiety and school avoidance can most easily be explained by the practice of corporal punishment.

Context of Education in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi

Kallar Syedan is an important administrative subdivision (tehsil) of Rawalpindi District. Traditionally it was a rural area but nowadays there are some developments in the nature of a suburb. The education system includes mainly schools run by Punjab Education Department and some private schools that are catering to the needs of a changing community. Thus, getting an education in this area involves coming across a situation where the old strict ways of doing things may be found side by side with the new ways of educating that people want. Research that deals with how to keep order in classes in Pakistan's semi-urban settings which are similar to this one (Khan & Iqbal, 2019) have found that on one hand, trained teachers are becoming more aware of the latest psychological principles but on the other hand, their actual performance is often constrained by factors such as the demand for high exam results and large class sizes.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a quantitative method with a descriptive survey design to examine the impact of reward and punishment on students' learning at the primary level in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi. The target group included 958 public sector primary school teachers among which Punjab Education Department teachers, working in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi were included. After a simple random sampling procedure along with Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling size determination formula, a sample of 315 teachers was chosen to represent the entire population. This allowed for a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of approximately 5%. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire structure from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree was developed by the researcher after extensive literature review. The tool was composed of 24 items divided into two parts dealing with the role of rewards and the role of punishments respectively. Experts in the field of education validated the questionnaire for content and face validity. The pilot test involving 30 teachers from the neighboring tehsil who were not included in the final sample was conducted. Cronbach's alpha, a statistical technique that measures internal consistency, was used to check the reliability of the instrument and it gave a coefficient of 0.80 meaning high reliability (Taber, 2018). The researcher personally collected the data through visits to the primary schools in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi. 315 questionnaires were handed out, and through follow-up visits, a high rate of response was obtained. The data gathered were processed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 26. Frequency, percentage, and mean scores were employed for the interpretation of teachers' views.

RESULTS

The results are organized in accordance with the two main research questions of the study. Question 1 was about how reward can be used to motivate students and engage them in learning. Question 2 was about the importance of punishment and its potential negative effects on students' learning behavior.

Question 1: Reward and Student Learning

To find out the answer to the first question about reward and student learning behavior, the teachers' opinions were studied in terms of motivation, homework completion, academic performance, and development of a positive perspective.

Table 1: Teacher Perceptions of Reward Efficacy (N=315)

Statement	SA %	A %	N %	DA %	SDA %	Mean
Reward develops positive perspective toward learning	56.2	24.1	5.4	11.2	3.1	4.02
Students happily complete homework through reward	45.7	30.5	4.8	17.3	1.7	4.01
Reward improves students' academic performance	40.8	23.5	5.2	18.4	12.1	3.67
Students are motivated through reward	33.4	30.8	8.1	17.9	9.8	3.63
Category Mean						3.81

Interpretation of Table 1: To answer the first research question directly, teachers in Kallar Syedan showed that, through rewards, students can significantly get motivated. Most of them (80.3%) either agreed or strongly agreed that students experiencing changes in their perspective towards learning in a positive way is one of the direct outcomes of rewards. This is the reason why students based on their learning efficiency and behavior are granted points and trophies. This positive perspective was given the highest mean score of 4.02. Also, the high mean score in case of homework and project completion (Mean=4.01) clearly depicts how incentives are viewed by the teachers as very effective means for the attainment of task completion. The Category Mean of 3.81 is a further indication that teachers in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi consider rewards as factors that contribute to academic engagement and motivation.

Objective 2: Importance and Negative Consequences of Punishment

The second research question was about the extent to which teachers believe that students' discipline can be affected by punishment and at the same time psychological safety can be compromised. Besides

teachers' own perception this study used an objective measure of two different impacts of punishment, namely utility of punishment in correcting student behavior and the harmful psychological effects of punishment.

Table 2: Teacher Perceptions of Punishment as Corrective Tool (N=315)

Statement	SA %	A %	N %	DA %	SDA %	Mean
Punishment shapes behavior making good students	46.2	26.8	8.1	14.1	4.8	3.98
Punishment used for shaping student behavior	44.8	29.1	4.2	15.2	6.7	3.92
Punishment deals with indiscipline	38.9	35.8	8.2	11.4	5.7	3.89
Punishment helps build discipline	41.2	24.9	10.1	17.1	6.7	3.78
Category Mean						3.89

Interpretation of Table 2: To some extent, teachers in Kallar Syedan revealed their support for the use of punishment to change the students' behavior when they responded to the second research question about the role of punishment in changing the behavior. Major 73.0% of the respondents consider punishment a way to get a student to behave in a right way (Mean=3.98). In addition, the Category Mean of 3.89 shows a deep conviction that a punishments are needed to uphold discipline at school in this changing educational environment

Table 3: Teacher Awareness of Negative Effects of Punishment (N=315)

Statement	SA %	A %	N %	DA %	SDA %	Mean
Punishment causes inferiority and insult	52.8	29.1	2.2	10.5	5.4	4.18
Physical punishment linked to aggression	35.7	35.8	8.1	5.3	6.1	4.15
Punishment increases antisocial behavior	39.8	38.5	5.2	14.3	2.2	3.99
Category Mean						4.11

Interpretation of Table 3: Successfully addressing the second research question, teachers showed an even greater level of agreement on punishment's harmful effects than they did on whether it was useful. Surprisingly, 81.9% of them admitted that punishment leaves one feeling inferior and insulted, in fact, this statement received the highest mean score (4.18) in the whole study. Besides that, a significant majority (71.5%) associated physical punishment with aggression or antisocial behavior (Mean=3.99). Category Mean of 4.11 stands out as the highest among all factors, which sheds light on an important issue: teachers in Kallar Syedan resort to punishment as they consider discipline without it is

unimaginable; however, they are fully aware of its detrimental effects on the psychological well-being and safety of students.

DISCUSSIONS

The study unfolds a rich, tangled up story of primary classrooms in several villages of Kallar Syedan tehsil, Rawalpindi. Teachers obviously appreciate both reward and punishment tools, however, they draw a clear line between the actual usefulness of these tools and their emotional side effects.

Efficacy of Reward

Quite a few things from the study align with the notion of reward as an effective medium to encourage shortly the desired academic behaviors like homework completion besides inculcating a positive classroom environment. The data even exemplifies the principles of operant conditioning in the classroom environment. A difference between two means is definitely worth noticing here: the mean for homework completion is 4.01 while the mean for improved academic performance is only 3.67. So, getting the work done is not equivalent necessarily to conceptual understanding and long-term retention of the concepts. This thought is well supported by the idea of the "Cognitive Evaluation theory" by Ryan and Deci (2020) that the excessive use of tangible rewards for intrinsically interesting tasks might even lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation.

The Punishment Paradox

The biggest contribution of this research, brought by the analysis of Kallar Syedan primary schools, is the identification of the Punishment Paradox. Schools, as part of a rapidly changing environment sometimes dependent on punitive measures, find the teaching staff using punishment (Mean agreement 3.89) as a mean of swift order restoration in frequently overloaded classrooms, besides being a culturally embedded method. Simultaneously, however, they are painfully aware of the serious negative side effects of this method (Mean agreement 4.11). This situation implies that teachers do not discipline by their personal ideology but out of perceived necessity mainly due to their lack of knowledge of alternative classroom management techniques. Their predicament is that they have to balance between the exigency of having a silent classroom at the moment and the ultimate aim of developing learners who are sure of themselves and are not aggressive. Such a condition is typical of educational systems that are moving from traditional to modern pedagogical methods (Nawaz & Rehman, 2021).

Fitting in with the Regional Educational Difficulties

Located in an area where the education sector is still growing, teachers in Kallar Syedan area are also under the influence of the pressure coming from parents and school authorities who want strict discipline and a consistent level of test scores. This piece of work raises the same issues as those of international studies that argue punishment is a fact of two sides (Maag, 2001). The realization of punishments' negative consequences, such as a feeling of being less than others and the urge to fight back, is very encouraging. It shows the existing willingness of teachers to be provided with a training on positive behavioral interventions and supports, which are a set of strategies that help lead change and worker training emphasizing that positive reinforcement gradually replaces the reactive and punitive measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this research was to find out how reward and punishment influence the learning of primary school students in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi. After processing the data gathered from 315 teachers, the following discussions arise as responses to the research questions.

Conclusion Aligned with Objective 1: The study infers that reward, being an external source, is an effective method of motivation for primary level students. Most of the teachers stated that their use of rewards is beneficial in class climate management, it prompts students to submit work on time and their attitude towards school becomes more positive. The results support the idea that positive learning behaviors can be established by reward through increased motivation and engagement. The relationship between the use of reward and its effects on students' academic performance in the long term as against completion of the task at hand only is a point that the dataset hints at but is subject to further inquiry.

Conclusion Aligned with Objective 2: With respect to punishment, results reveal that it is a very common practice and people generally perceive it as a means to immediately alter the student's behavior and maintain consistency of discipline in a classroom. This very much addresses the key point of the second research question. Nevertheless, teachers seem to be very mindful of the negative effects it might have in terms of lowering self-esteem of the children, making them scared and turning them into violent individuals over a period of time which covers the second research question criticism part. The fact that the Category Mean for negative consequences (4.11) is higher than the corrective utility (3.89) confirms the Practice of Punishment Paradox.

Overall Conclusion: From this study, it is revealed that despite the fact that both reward and punishment form the nucleus of primary education in Kallar Syedan, Rawalpindi, approaches based on rewards are linked to better educational results and less psychological harm. On the other hand, punishment, especially when physical, not only jeopardizes social and emotional development but may also need a thorough rethinking regarding its use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings and the Punishment Paradox, these are the main recommendations put forth, in the spirit of a collaborative improvement.

Teachers in Kallar Syedan, on the other hand, might do well to consciously give priority to verbal praise rather than physical material rewards in their daily interactions with students. Moving from extrinsic items like candy or toys to verbal appreciation that is specific, sincere, and focused on the behavior can help build intrinsic self-efficacy and develop a real love for learning without the documented undermining effect of material incentives. Also, teachers may want to notice that actively trying to work to increase the ratio of positive interactions to negative ones in their classroom routines might be the best thing. Creating a situation in which encouragement greatly outweighs reprimand will most likely lead to the creation of a psychologically safer environment that is academically conducive and allows for personal growth.

According to one point of view, the Education Department of Punjab and the local education authorities in Kallar Syedan should consider the idea of organizing full professional development workshops that

are specifically dedicated to alternative methods to corporal punishment in classrooms. Besides theoretical knowledge, such training can provide teachers with a set of practical and useful skills and strategies which include structured time-out procedures, restorative justice circles, de-escalation techniques, and ways of teaching self-regulation to young students. At the same time, the prohibition policies against corporal punishment, as per the Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act, could possibly be implemented more stringently and with more watchfulness. Making available clear, confidential, and easy-to-use mechanisms for students and parents to report can be a great step in ensuring accountability and, moving forward, changing the culture that is still relying on punitive norms.

Teacher training institutions in the region might want to think about updating their Bachelor of Education and Master of Education courses to focus more, and in a well-connected manner, on modern educational psychology. The program could more deeply discuss the distinct brain and behavioral changes that arise from fear-based versus reward-based learning to equip new teachers with a comprehensive set of positive behavior management techniques. Also, curriculum planners at the provincial level could consider the idea of making socio-emotional learning an integral part of primary grade textbooks. When kids learn directly how to be empathetic, to use their emotions in words, to control themselves, etc. the level of behavioral disruption can go down automatically so that the need for teacher-related discipline might even be lessened.

REFERENCES

- Bear, G. G. (2010). *School discipline and self-discipline: A practical guide to promoting prosocial student behavior*. Guilford Press.
- Cameron, J., & Pierce, W. D. (1994). Reinforcement, reward, and intrinsic motivation: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, *64*(3), 363–423. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543064003363>
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*(6), 627–668. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.6.627>
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (2001). Extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation in education: Reconsidered once again. *Review of Educational Research*, *71*(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543071001001>
- Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*(4), 539–579. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.4.539>
- Guitart-Masip, M., Huys, Q. J., Fuentemilla, L., Dayan, P., Duzel, E., & Dolan, R. J. (2012). Action dominates valence in anticipatory representations in the human striatum and dopaminergic midbrain. *Journal of Neuroscience*, *32*(23), 8117–8124. <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.5928-11.2012>

- Henderlong, J., & Lepper, M. R. (2002). The effects of praise on children's intrinsic motivation: A review and synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*(5), 774–795.
- Khan, A., & Iqbal, S. (2019). Classroom management practices in public and private schools: A comparative study in Rawalpindi. *Pakistan Journal of Education*, *36*(2), 45–62.
- Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *30*(3), 607–610.
- Lansford, J. E., Chang, L., Dodge, K. A., Malone, P. S., Oburu, P., Palmérus, K., ... & Quinn, N. (2009). Physical discipline and children's adjustment: Cultural normativeness as a moderator. *Child Development*, *80*(5), 1415–1437.
- Maag, J. W. (2001). Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children*, *67*(2), 173–186.
- Miller, A., Ferguson, E., & Simpson, R. (1998). The perceptions of parents, pupils and teachers regarding school rewards and sanctions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *14*(1), 16–24.
- Nawaz, S., & Rehman, A. (2021). Corporal punishment and its impact on students' psychological well-being in primary schools of Punjab. *Journal of Educational Research and Social Sciences Review*, *1*(2), 55–67.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *61*, Article 101860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
- Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. Macmillan.
- Taber, K. S. (2018). The use of Cronbach's alpha when developing and reporting research instruments in science education. *Research in Science Education*, *48*(6), 1273–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-016-9602-2>