

Teachers' Attitudes about Reward Systems in the Classroom

by

Jessica Drexler

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Jessica Drexler

APPROVED BY:



Advisor

12/1/10

Date



Chair, Graduate Committee

12.03.10

Date

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## **Abstract**

The present study investigates teacher's attitudes about rewards in the classroom. A sample of elementary teachers was surveyed to examine how rewards were used with their students. Teacher's attitudes about rewards were also measured. Results indicated that all teachers in the sample use some kind of reward in their classroom. The majority of teachers thought that rewards can help increase participation and academic achievement. Overall teachers did not feel that student's intrinsic motivation decreased when extrinsic rewards were given.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Reward systems are often used by educators to enhance student academic performance and/or appropriate behavior (Akin-Little & Little, 2004). The exchange of positive behavior and academic achievement for tangible reinforcement such as candy, toys, free time, and homework passes is an ongoing controversy among educators (Akin-Little & Little, 2004; Bowman, 2007; Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Davis, Winsler, & Middleton, 2006; Hoffman, Huff, Patterson, & Nietfeld, 2009 ). Despite the unknown impact rewards may have on a student's intrinsic motivation, educators continue to use them in the classroom (Hoffman et al., 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

A considerable amount of research explores the multiple effects extrinsic motivation has on student achievement and behavior. Such research has lead teachers to question whether the use of rewards is best practice. The issue has yet to be resolved, leaving teachers with the difficult decision of choosing whether or not to use rewards and how to use them. Researchers have started to take into consideration the conditions in which classroom rewards are administered (Cameron et al., 2005), yet little research has been conducted to examine the individual teacher's perspective on reward systems.

Teachers in the school where this study takes place have many different opinions about rewards in the classroom. Some believe that the source of motivation should not come from winning a prize. Others believe that extrinsic motivation can be

beneficial in increasing student participation, achievement, and positive behaviors. Such teachers have also expressed concern over students' lack of motivation to succeed in school. This has led to higher rates of behavioral incidents as well as lower academic achievement.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Teachers can greatly influence the level of motivation in students by structuring the classroom so that students want to achieve. Some approaches that teachers use to motivate students include providing students with high expectations, positive feedback, choices, and also making students feel valued (Bowman, 2007). Previous research suggests that the use of extrinsic rewards is also an effective strategy for increasing student motivation (Reitmann et al., 2004; Wheatley et al., 2009). Regardless of the methods used, it is important to consider the way these systems are implemented in the classroom, and how student learning is impacted based on the teachers' decisions and opinions about student motivation. This researcher believes that if a teacher's perspective is not taken into consideration, key information about the use of extrinsic motivation may be overlooked.

Students' lack of motivation is a serious issue that many educators face. A student who is not academically motivated may experience lower achievement levels. If students are not motivated to learn at the intermediate grade levels, an achievement gap between successful students and struggling students will likely widen as students enter middle school. Therefore this problem is significant because an elementary

student's present level of motivation may be indicative of their future success at the upper grade levels.

### **Purpose**

Some teachers fear that the use of extrinsic rewards will be harmful to students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Teachers determine the structure of the classroom, which includes the types of extrinsic motivation to which students are exposed. It becomes necessary to examine the reasoning behind different methods used by individual teachers, so the effect reward systems have on students can be better understood. Prior research indicates the need for more studies to focus on teachers' perceptions of how extrinsic rewards are implemented in the classroom (Hoffman et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to understand more about the various forms of extrinsic motivation that are currently used by intermediate elementary teachers and how they relate to student achievement.

### **Research Questions**

Extrinsically motivated behaviors occur when the reinforcement comes from outside factors, such as rewards or incentives (Bowman, 2007; Hoffman et al, 2009). This study addresses the questions: What forms of extrinsic motivation are being used in elementary classrooms? and what are teacher's attitudes about rewards? These questions will lead to a greater understanding of teachers' methods and views on extrinsic motivation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Extrinsic motivation has been studied by several researchers over time. Many studies refer to work by Cameron and Pierce (2005), both established researchers in the field of motivation. Their research supports extrinsic rewards as being beneficial in motivating students. Cameron and Pierce (2005) conducted a meta-analysis which found that intrinsic motivation was not negatively affected when extrinsic rewards were received. The results of their meta-analysis also indicated that rewards may increase motivation by increasing task interest.

## **Summary**

It is important to consider extrinsic motivation through the lens of a teacher, as they have a significant impact on student success. By examining the multiple ways that teachers use rewards, a deeper insight into extrinsic motivation will be gained. In the following chapter literature related to extrinsic motivation and reward systems will be presented.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The use of rewards and incentives to reinforce positive behavior and student achievement has been a controversial topic in the past (Akin-Little & Little, S., 2004; Bowman, 2007; Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Davis, Winsler, & Middleton, 2006; Hoffman, Huff, Patterson, & Nietfeld, 2009). “The debate has moved beyond the question of whether rewards are inherently harmful or beneficial. Instead, researchers recognize that the effects of reward depend on the types of rewards used, the reward contingency, how rewards are allocated, and the context in which rewards are administered” (Cameron et al., 2005, p.641). This chapter presents past work done in this area.

### **Motivation**

A belief that motivating students to perform is a fundamental part of the role of being a teacher. According to Bowman (2007), researchers have categorized human motivational conditions as being intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation can be characterized by self-determination, that forces within determine ones actions and emotions. Extrinsically motivated behaviors occur when the reinforcement comes from outside factors, such as rewards or incentives (Bowman, 2007; Hoffman, Huff, Patterson & Nietfeld, 2009). Some argue that extrinsic rewards or incentives could be detrimental to a student’s intrinsic motivation, resulting in decreased motivation to perform a task once the reinforcer is removed (Akin- Little & Little, 2004). Others believe the negative effects of rewards are limited, and that they can be used to encourage academic performance (Cameron et al., 2007).

At the center of the debate is the argument that the use of extrinsic rewards decreases intrinsic motivation (Davis, Winsler, & Middleton 2006). “When rewards are offered for performing an activity, people are said to discount the internal causes of their actions and to view their behavior as externally motivated” (Cameron et al., 2005, p.643). Akin-Little (2004) conducted a study to further examine the overjustification effect, which suggested that students will perform an activity at a lower frequency once the extrinsic reward is not present. The methodology used across previous studies has resulted in inconsistent findings regarding this hypothesis. Typically, a reward is given for compliance with school rules, leaving students who already exhibit compliant behavior more prone to the overjustification effect.

In past studies, concern has been raised over the impact of reward systems on individual and class goal setting (Cameron et al., 2005; Hoffman et al., 2009; Self-Brown & Mathews, 2003). Self-Brown and Mathews (2003) gave attention on learning and performance goal orientations. Performance goals demonstrate student ability to outside observers, whereas learning goals are set increase understanding regardless of extrinsic motivators (Self-Brown & Mathews, 2003). The structure of the classroom can be seen as emphasizing learning goals or performance goals, which ultimately affects student goals (Hoffman et al., 2009; Self-Brown and Mathews, 2003). Self-Brown and Mathews found evidence that in a classroom supportive of performance goals and efforts, students had higher rates of task motivation and learning goals. Cameron et al., (2005) considered two perspectives of the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) in relationship to learning and achievement. One side of the

argument states that rewards given for meeting performance standards lead students to feel pressured, thus undermining perceptions of self-determination and intrinsic motivation. The other side argues that achievement-based rewards can foster feelings of perceived competence, which leads to improved intrinsic motivation. Cameron et al., (2005) believed that intrinsic and external sources of motivation contribute to motivation for an activity. “Giving rewards for successful achievement on an activity leads individuals to express high task interest and to be motivated to perform the activity and other similar tasks in the future” (Cameron et al., 2005, p.654). Cameron et al., (2005) examined the outcome of rewards on intrinsic motivation when the rewards were given in a learning phase, for achievement on a test, or both. Participants in the reward condition for the learning or testing phase expressed greater intrinsic motivation towards the activity.

### **Forms of Reward Systems**

Token economies are a common technique used by teachers to promote on-task behavior and academic achievement. “A token economy is an intervention that includes contingencies in which tokens or points are given, following the emission of targeted behaviors. Tokens can then be redeemed for reinforcing objects or activities at a later point in time” (K. Zlomke & L. Zlomke, 2003). Though token economies are often set up to reduce behaviors, they can take on many different designs. Boniecki (2003) found that using tokens in exchange for extra credit was an effective way to promote active participation with a large class of undergraduate students. Other researchers viewed the use of a token economy as a low-cost, high impact

strategy for reducing disruptive behavior during unstructured times (Wheatley, West, Charlton, Sanders, Smith, & Taylor, 2009). Token economies, regardless of their form, can be an effective means for motivating students by providing them with positive reinforcement (Boniecki & Moore, 2003; Cameron et al., 2005; Reitman, Murphy, Hupp & O'Callaghan 2004; Zlomke & Zlomke, 2003).

The established research supports that token economies are effective in increasing appropriate behaviors, thus enabling a classroom environment where learning can occur (Reitmann et al., 2004). Zlomke & Zlomke (2003) found that negative behaviors were reduced when students earned points for displaying positive behavior and then exchanged these points for a reward. In another example, appropriate and inappropriate behaviors were broken into levels, and students were moved up or down along a continuum based on the appropriateness of their behaviors. At the end of the instruction period, student who fell within a target range would have the opportunity to draw from a list of rewards (Reitmann et al., 2004).

A response cost is a variation of the token economy. In a response cost system, children start with a number of tokens, and then lose tokens based on each episode of misbehavior (Conyers et al., 2004). Because students lose something for inappropriate behavior, response costs systems fall under the category of punishment. "The use of punishment procedures is sometimes criticized because punishment may evoke emotional behavior or have other side effects" (Conyers et al. 2004). Comparatively, differential reinforcement of incompatible behavior (DRI) is often used in token economy settings. "In this procedure a target behavior that the teacher

wants to reduce is defined. Then a behavior is chosen for increase that is mutually exclusive with the target behavior to be decreased” (Wheatley et al., 2009, p.556). A DRI system rewards the positive behavior, so it is considered reinforcement. Conyers suggests that when paired with (DRI), response cost is more effective.

Some educators may choose to add a self-monitoring component along with the token economy. In this structure, students set academic or behavioral goals. According to Zlomke & Zlomke (2003), self-monitoring can improve social and attending behaviors in school settings, specifically in students with emotional or behavioral disorders. They conducted a study that found added success with coupling a token economy system with a self-monitoring component to reduce inappropriate behaviors in a student with behavior disorders. Self-Brown and Mathews (2003) used a similar structure where students created and monitored their own goals with the use of a contingency contract. “Researchers suggest that self-motivated individuals persist in working toward a meaningful goal in diverse activities involving play, exploration and challenge seeking, even when the likelihood of an external reward exists” (Bowman, 2007, p.83). The results of the study indicated that students who determined their own goals set more learning goals than performance goals, while more performance based goals were set by students who were exposed to the token economy.

Another form of motivation that is often accompanied with the token economy is praise. The delivery of praise is another effective strategy for reinforcing student performance and positive behaviors, as well as building student’s self-esteem

(Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2010). One form of praise is a praise note. As a means of implementing this type of reinforcement in a school lunchroom, a study was conducted by Wheatley, West, Charlton, Sanders, Smith & Taylor (2009), to examine the use of specific, verbal praise, accompanied by a special ticket and a praise note that was signed by the student and staff member. The ticket later went into a drawing for a prize, and the praise note was posted in the school foyer. With the combined support from staff and students, praise was found to be a positive way to reduce problematic behaviors (Wheatley, West, Charlton, Sanders, Smith & Taylor, 2009).

Praise notes were also deemed effective when used with middle school students. In a study conducted by Nelson, Young, Young & Cox, middle school students received a praise note from teachers for exhibiting behaviors that aligned with the school's positive behavior support plan. The student praise note was put into a drawing for a reward such as candy. The outcome of the study was that as the number of praise notes increased, the number of office disciplinary referrals decreased. An important implication of the study was that praise notes were more effective when teachers received specific, ongoing instruction and feedback about the praise notes. Another finding was when teachers were reinforced for writing praise notes, the number of notes that were written significantly increased (Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2010). Similarly, Self-Brown and Mathews (2003) also found a positive outcome when praise was used. Students exposed to positive verbal feedback set more learning goals opposed to students who did not receive verbal feedback. Bowman (2007) further supported the idea of goals and feedback going hand-in-hand.

“Oral and written feedback helps students become self-corrective as they pursue goals. It also helps them feel interconnected as they reach out for encouragement and assistance in building their capabilities” (Bowman, 2007, p.84).

### **Perceptions of Rewards**

Perhaps one of the most significant factors in the use of rewards is how they are perceived by teachers and students. Despite the effectiveness of a token economy system, some teachers are reluctant to use them in their classroom due to the amount of time spent on implementation, cost of the rewards, and the frequent monitoring of behaviors (Reitmann et al., 2004). Conyers et al. (2004) suggested future research to investigate ways to create token economies systems that are less time consuming.

Hoffman et al, (2009) examined the use of rewards through an elementary teacher’s perspective. When surveyed on their use of rewards, the majority of teachers were in favor of using rewards to motivate students. Teachers who used rewards for behavior management also tended to use rewards for academic achievement, with the highest frequencies of rewards being verbal or written praise and prizes. Other types of rewards included class privileges, homework passes, extra credit, and verbal or written praise to parents (Hoffman et al, 2009).

Despite the ongoing debate and numerous studies, which examined the impact of extrinsic motivation on intrinsic motivation, a resolution has not come to fruition (Hoffman et al., 2009). More research is needed around the implementation of reward systems and the student and teacher perceptions of using rewards to reduce behaviors and increase academic achievement (Akin-Little & Little, 2004; Cameron et al., 2005;

Davis, et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2009) “There is a critical need for more studies to explore teacher perceptions of reward use in schools and the potential effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation to learn” (Hoffman et al., 2009, p.848).

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Participants**

In order to collect data on teachers' perceptions and use of rewards in the classroom, a quantitative study was conducted. A convenience sample of teachers was chosen from two suburban elementary schools in Western New York to partake in the research study. It should be recognized that the use of only two schools in a suburban setting was a limitation to the study, and data will be reflective of this particular population of teachers. The schools consisted of three grade levels each, one being primary (grades k-2), and the other intermediate (grades 3-5). These schools function as one school on two campuses, meaning that when students complete their primary years they move to the intermediate school. Each school has a building administrator, and an assistant principal is shared between both buildings. Both buildings are classified as Title One schools, which mean there is funding available to help meet the educational needs of low income students.

The participants who were emailed an electronic survey were forty teachers who teach kindergarten through fifth grade at the two chosen elementary schools. Within this sample of teachers there were five general education teachers at each grade level, with the exception of fourth grade which had six teachers. Seven Special Education teachers were asked to participate in the survey. Of these seven teachers, three worked in a co-teach setting at each intermediate grade level, two teachers worked in an 8:1:1 classroom and the other two teachers worked in a 12:1:1 classroom. The population of teachers consisted of two male teachers, and thirty-eight

female teachers. Gender of the participants will not be asked on the survey as not to identify the two male participants. Other information that was not asked on the survey was the race of the participants so as not to identify participants. The final sample consisted of thirty teachers who participated in the survey.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

My experience in education led me to take interest in how teachers use rewards in the classroom. At the time of this survey I was a math intervention teacher, and I am also the researcher conducting the study. I received a Bachelor of Science in Education degree in Childhood Education from a Western New York State College, grades one through six, and I am initially certified to teach in these areas.

Additionally I am certified in health education, grades kindergarten through twelve. I am currently working toward my Master of Science in Education degree in Childhood Curriculum Specialist from the same college in Western New York. My role as a service provider allows me to work directly with a range of students and teachers in grades three through five. Part of my job as a math intervention teacher involves pushing into classrooms to provide math support to students. During the time that I am in classrooms, I have observed the various forms of reward systems that teachers use, and the ways in which students respond to them. On the other hand, there are many teachers who do not use a reward system and still have a well managed classroom. I often wondered whether I would choose to implement a reward system if I had my own elementary classroom. Conducting this research has helped me have a better understanding of teacher's beliefs about using rewards with students.

## **Instruments for the Study**

The instrument used to collect data in this research study was a survey (See Appendix A). Conducting a survey was most advantageous because it allowed input from several participants in a quick, anonymous way. Questions from the survey were constructed from existing research about how rewards are used in the classroom and teacher's perceptions of them. The survey was designed to measure the extent to which teachers agree or disagree with statements from the research. After the survey was created, it was shared with my thesis advisor and we collaboratively checked the content validity of the questions and made revisions as needed. Once the final copy was complete, the questions were transferred to online survey system called Survey Monkey. This software allows for participants to submit their answers anonymously by choosing a setting that will not link the email address to the participant's survey submission.

The survey was 20-items long and was composed of multiple choice questions and Likert Scales. Questions 1 and 2 elicit general information about the teachers, such as grade level taught and number of years teaching. The next six questions asked teachers to rate the frequency with which they give rewards, types of reward systems that are implemented in the classroom, reasons for giving rewards, and which rewards are most effective in motivating students. The last portion of the survey was a Likert Scale that measures teachers' overall beliefs about rewarding students.

## **Data Collection Methods**

The first step necessary in the data collection process was seeking permission from the building principals at both schools. Both principals were contacted via email, and a time was set up to briefly discuss the purpose of the research study and obtain consent to work with the teachers at their schools. Once permission from the principals was obtained, the survey was created based on previous research about rewards in the classroom. It was decided that the survey would be web based so it could be easily accessed and submitted by teachers at both schools

The web surveys were advertised electronically via email to the teacher participants. Upon opening the email there was a message that invited them to take a voluntary survey, and a statement of informed consent was provided (See Appendix). Participants gave their consent if they chose to complete the survey. The participants were directed to a link to the survey, where they read each question and clicked on the response that best applied to them. The survey took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey was available for a two week time period and then the link was disabled so that data could be analyzed.

## **Data Analysis**

Once all data was collected, the responses from the survey were analyzed. The participant's answers were analyzed using the software available on Survey Monkey. Visual representations of the data were produced in the form of tables and graphs. The frequency of each response was measured to determine if there were emerging

patterns in teachers' practice of using rewards in elementary classrooms, and teachers' attitudes about rewards.

### **Summary**

The methods for collecting data about rewards were carried out by advertising an electronic web survey to elementary teachers. Data was analyzed to determine the overall teacher attitudes about the use of rewards in the classroom. The following chapter presents the results of the survey.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The purpose of the study was to learn more about the types of motivation and incentives that are used in intermediate elementary classrooms. Forty teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth grade were emailed a link to a voluntary survey about teacher's attitudes about using rewards with students. Twelve primary teachers and eighteen intermediate teachers responded to the survey, for a total of thirty participants. This chapter outlines the findings of the survey.

### **How are Rewards Being Used in Elementary Classrooms?**

Using the analysis tools that are available on Survey Monkey, the data from the surveys was analyzed to determine the frequency of each response. The first eight questions of the survey solicited information about how teachers use rewards with students. When asked which types of rewards they use, teachers chose small items and classroom privileges as the most frequently used reward in their classroom. Similar results were reported when asked about the types of rewards were most effective in motivating students. An equal number of teachers rated small items being somewhat effective to very effective. There were no participants who felt that small items were not effective, as presented in Table 2. Along with this finding, classroom privileges were rated effective by eighteen of the thirty teachers who participated in the survey. These findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

*Which extrinsic reward is used most frequently in your classroom?*

Answer Options	Response	
	Percent	Count
Candy	10%	3
Small items (ex. pencils, erasers, stickers, etc.)	30%	9
Classroom privileges(ex. Computer time, homework pass,etc.)	30%	9
Positive note home	10%	3
Other	20%	6
	answered question	30
	skipped question	0

Some inconsistencies were found when participants were asked to rank the effectiveness of rewards, as shown in Table 2. One finding was that although only three teachers reported using candy frequently, nine teachers rated candy as being very effective in motivating students. The same relationship was observed for positive notes home: only three teachers reported using positive notes home most frequently, yet the majority of teachers thought they were effective to very effective. Although some teachers found these practices effective, they do not necessarily use them with their own students.

Table 2

*Number of respondents who rated each reward's effectiveness (NE = Not effective, SE = Somewhat effective, E = Effective, VE = Very effective)*

Answer Options	Effectiveness Rating				n
	NE	SE	E	VE	
Candy	2	10	9	9	30
Certificates	9	11	7	2	29
Small Items (ex. pencils, erasers, stickers, etc.)	0	10	10	10	30
Classroom Privilege (ex. Computer time, homework pass, etc.)	0	2	18	10	30
Positive Note Home	0	4	16	9	29
Other	2	3	3	3	11
	answered question				30
	skipped question				0

Participants were asked to describe the context in which reward systems are used in their classroom. To find out if there was a correlation between the grade level taught and the type of reward used, the two variables were cross tabulated. As shown in Table 3, the overall majority of the teachers sampled used a class token economy system with their students. The two participants who reported not using rewards taught intermediate grades, as opposed to primary teachers who all implemented some kind of reward system in their classroom. Intermediate teachers also had a

higher number of participants who said that rewards were given upon completion of a goal. I also wanted to find out if newer teachers used rewards more frequently than veteran teachers. Six of ten teachers who taught four years or less reported giving rewards daily, while teachers who taught twenty years or more reported using them more than once a week to about every two weeks. Almost half (43%) of the sample used rewards daily, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3

*Number of teachers who reported using various types of rewards disaggregated by grades taught*

Answer Options	Reward					%	n
	Token Economy	Sticker Charts	Individual Goals	None	Other		
Primary (K-2)	4	2	2	0	4	40	12
Intermediate (3-5)	7	2	4	2	3	60	18
answered question							30
skipped question							0

The second research goal of this study was to gain perspective into teacher's attitudes about rewards. Figure 1 shows the results of the rating scale that was given for each attitude about reward systems. Overall, participants in the sample chose

responses that reflected positive attitudes about rewards. An important finding was that 72% of the sample did not believe that extrinsic rewards would decrease intrinsic motivation, and 82% believed that rewards could increase academic success. Other responses which support this result were that 62% of participants disagreed reward systems were too time consuming. In regards to using rewards for specific purposes, 57% of teachers agreed that reward systems were effective in reducing negative behaviors, and 82% agreed that rewards increase academic success.

Table 4

*Frequency of rewards given in classrooms by teacher's years of experience*

Answer Options	Years of Teaching Experience					%	n
	0-4	5-10	11-14	15-19	20+		
Daily	6	5	1	1	0	43.3	13
More than once a week	1	1	0	0	2	13.3	4
Weekly	1	3	0	1	1	20.0	6
About every two weeks	1	1	0	1	1	13.3	4
About once a month	1	1	0	0	0	6.7	2
Less than once a month	0	0	1	0	0	3.3	1
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
answered question							30
skipped question							0

There were however, some inconsistencies with the data reported. When asked if students are more motivated by tangible rewards rather than verbal or written praise, 42% disagreed with the statement in the Likert-Scale response. This data conflicts with an earlier survey item in which 30% of the participants reported giving small items most frequently. Another noteworthy finding is that 67% of participants strongly agreed that verbal or written praise is used frequently in their classroom, yet only 10% reported sending positive notes home when asked on an earlier item in the survey.

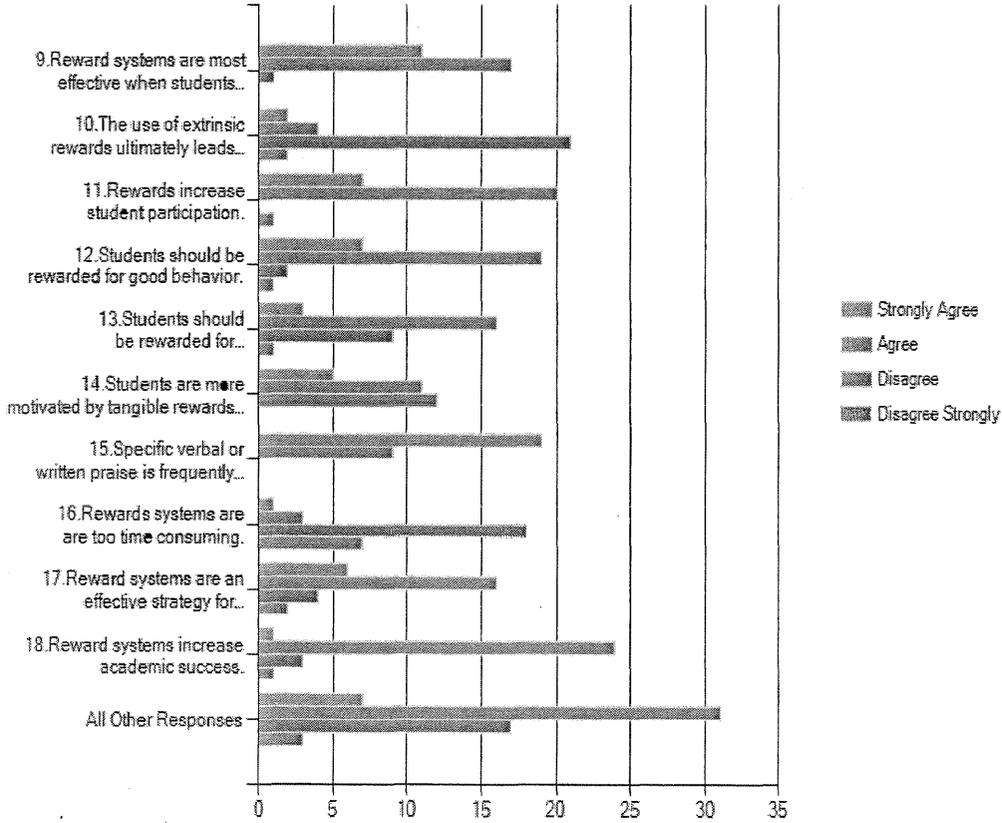


Figure 1. Teachers' attitudes about rewards

## **Summary**

The survey conducted was a tool for learning more about the kinds of motivation that are used in intermediate elementary classrooms, and how teacher's in this population of teachers view rewards. Results indicated that teachers in this sample used ticket systems or praise as their primary source of motivation but results varied by grade level. The following chapter will discuss the results of the survey in depth.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

A quantitative survey was taken by thirty elementary teachers in a suburban school district. The survey examined teacher's perspective of reward systems in the classroom, as well as how teachers are using rewards with their students. This chapter will discuss the results of the study.

### **Discussion**

The use of incentives in classrooms has become a popular approach for motivating elementary students. Although this practice is commonly used by teachers, it has been debated among individuals in the field of education. The debate has moved beyond the question of whether rewards result in positive or negative effects; Researchers recognize that the effect of rewards depend on the types of rewards used and the conditions under which they are used (Cameron , Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005). By examining rewards through a teacher's point of view, we can gain access to the reasoning behind the types of motivation that are frequently used in classrooms (Hoffman, Huff, Patterson, & Nietfeld, 2009). This could lead to a better understanding of the impact of reward systems and whether or not they can play a positive role in motivating students.

The current study produced results that were similar to a study conducted by Hoffman et al., (2009) which also examined teacher's views of rewards. Like the study conducted by Hoffman et al., all participants in the current study reported using some form of reward to motivate students in the classroom. Small tangible items and classroom privileges were rated the most used and the most effective means for

rewarding students. When examining the context in which teachers used rewards with their students, the most common type of reward system used by eleven teachers was a token economy. Of these eleven teachers, five had been teaching for less than four years, and four had been teaching for less than ten years. This may be an indication that newer teachers use token economies more frequently as a form of classroom management. New teachers may view token economies to be a quick, effective way to gain control over the classroom, not necessarily to motivate students. Other responses which support this hypothesis were that teachers in these two ranges of years teaching also agreed or strongly agreed that reward systems increase participation. Five teachers under four years strongly agreed that students should be rewarded for good behavior. This piece of data also supports the prediction that newer teachers may use rewards as a classroom management tool instead of motivation. Prior established research supports that rewards are effective in increasing appropriate behaviors, thus enabling a classroom environment where learning can occur (Reitman, Murphy, Hupp & O'Callaghan, 2004). More research would be needed to find out if new teachers use rewards as a form of classroom management more so than to increase student motivation.

One important aspect of the survey was how teachers use rewards to increase academic success. As a whole group, 60% agreed to using rewards to increase academic success. When teacher's attitudes about rewards were measured, 82% agreed that rewards can help increase academic achievement, yet only 55% agreed that students should be rewarded for their academic performance. This suggests that

teachers believe that implementing reward systems can help with student participation and classroom management, which ultimately impacts academics, however teachers do not feel that students should be rewarded based on performance. Teachers may feel that some students are at an unfair advantage if success is rewarded, however if each goal is differentiated to fit each student this argument is null. This finding begs the question of teacher's purposes behind using rewards. Perhaps teachers think they are using them to motivate students and increase academic achievement, but in reality they may be using rewards as a form of classroom management.

Another interesting finding that relates to how teachers use rewards was that only six of thirty participants in the study used goal setting as the context in which their rewards were given. When asked if rewards were most effective when student's set their own goals, the majority of teachers agreed with the statement. Eleven of the teachers who agreed with the statement also use token economies in their classroom. Of these teachers, 34% strongly agreed that student goal setting was important. This data shows that teachers who use token economies most frequently still believe that goal setting is effective in increasing student motivation. Though these teachers agree that goal setting is effective, there is disconnect between setting goals in relationship to the reward systems used. If teachers believe that goal setting is so important, why is a class-wide token economy the most frequently used form of motivation? Perhaps teachers believe that goal setting is important, but due to the time and effort it takes to help a class full of students to develop and work towards

these goals leads them opt for a less time consuming reward system such as a token economy.

A major goal of this research study was to examine the attitudes teachers have about rewards in the classroom. In general, teachers in this sample were in favor of rewards. The claim that rewards can decrease intrinsic motivation is a well know theory in educational research. When participants were given this statement, twenty-one of thirty teachers disagreed. A follow up question would need to be asked in order to gather more information about t their reasons for disagreeing, but based on other responses from the participants, some hypothesis can be made. First, all but two teachers reported using rewards which clearly indicates that they believe rewards are beneficial in the classroom, whether it be for motivation or classroom management purposes. Another reason could simply be that the sample only includes only elementary teachers, and children may respond differently to rewards than adolescents or teenagers. If the survey was given to high school teachers, perhaps more would agree that rewards decrease intrinsic motivation.

### **Implications for Teaching**

The study conducted may have important implications on teaching and learning should the data be shared with the participants. There were differences between primary teachers compared to intermediate teachers in the forms of motivation that was used most often. As a result of this information, teachers may be interested in talking with teachers in another grade level classroom to learn how motivation is implemented with students. Perhaps the intermediate teachers could

share their methods for student goal setting with teachers from primary grade levels. If teachers choose to adopt a strategy from another teacher, they could trial the strategy with their class to find out if motivation levels increase. Based on the results, a teacher could choose whether or not to use the strategy with students.

The results of the study could also be shared with the administrators of the school. With behavioral issues on the rise, our School Improvement Team (SIT) could use the data from this study to implement a school-wide initiative to increase motivation in students. Wheatley, West, Charlton, Sanders, Smith & Taylor (2009) conducted a school-wide program where students received both verbal and written positive feedback for positive behaviors. A program along these lines could be proposed to our SIT and implemented school-wide, since the methods combine the type of motivation that teachers in the building are currently using.

### **Limitations and Improvements**

There are three major limitations to this study that threaten its external validity. The present study sought to examine how elementary teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth grade use rewards in their classroom. The first major limitation was that a convenient sample was used to select teachers. Thirty of forty teachers returned the survey; therefore ten teachers from the primary grade level are not accounted for in the survey. The second limitation was the small sample size of teachers. Additionally, the survey only sampled teachers in two suburban schools, which also limits the validity of the study. One way to broaden the study would be to

survey a range of teachers in primary, middle, and high school to determine the forms of motivation that are used throughout a student's years of schooling.

Regarding the study's internal validity, the primary researcher had little experience with creating surveys to collect data. The survey used in the study proposed an instrumentation threat to the internal validity of the study. The format of the survey consisted of fourteen rating scale questions and six multiple choice questions. The quality of the survey could improve if more open-ended were asked and also having an explanation box for participants who chose "other". The use of open-ended questions or explanations could have led to more insight about why the teachers use the specific forms of motivation in their classroom. Participants may have had a difficult time narrowing down their choices on the multiple choice items because many teachers use a variety of motivational techniques throughout the day.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

Motivating students to perform is a fundamental part of the role of being a teacher (Bowman, 2007). It is important to consider a teacher's reasons for choosing a particular form of motivation to use in the classroom. For example, the majority of new teachers in this study reported using token economies in their classroom. Is this for motivational purposes, or classroom management? Overall, teacher's attitudes about rewards were positive, and did not feel they were a threat to students' intrinsic motivation. Although these findings presented valuable information about the teachers at this particular building, more research about teacher's attitudes and use of rewards is still needed.

Student goal setting and rewards for academic achievement is another topic in need of more research. Teachers in the study expressed positive attitudes towards student goal setting but did not feel students should be rewarded for academic performance. If academic goals are differentiated for each student, why are rewards for academic achievement viewed negatively?

The present study showed that the majority of elementary teachers in this sample used token economies on a daily basis to increase student motivation. Another consideration for future studies is a more in depth look at how teachers use one particular form of motivation, such as a token economy or goal setting. More research is needed about how teachers implement these strategies, and how that might impact students. For example, would it be better to use tickets for positive behaviors only? What is the most appropriate interval for distributing incentives? What are the best methods for setting, monitoring, and rewarding goals?

One question to consider is the use of motivation on a year –to- year basis. Teachers will likely adjust their classroom practices to meet the needs of their students. The same teachers could be surveyed during the following year to find out if their use of reward systems has changed to match their student needs. Along with this, it may be helpful to conduct student interviews to gain more knowledge about what motivates them. These results could influence a teacher’s decision about the existing motivation practices in the classroom, based on what their students deem as motivational. In addition to studying teacher’s practices longitudinally, motivation across grade levels could also be studied. Data from teachers of grades kindergarten

through twelve could be analyzed to examine patterns in motivation across a student's academic career. Insight from teachers of all grade levels could impact other teachers' perspectives by heightening their awareness of the techniques that are used in the grades above and below them.

### **Summary**

This study provided the researcher with important information about how teachers in grades kindergarten through five use motivation in the classroom. By conducting this study, several implications for teaching and learning have been established. Future research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of how motivational strategies impact teachers and students.

## Appendix

Directions: For questions 1-8 please choose the response that best describes how rewards are used with your students.

**1. Which grade level do you teach?**

- Primary (K-2)
- Intermediate (3-5)

**2. What is the number of years that you have been teaching?**

- 0-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-14 years
- 15-19 years
- 20+ years

**3. Which extrinsic reward is used most frequently in your classroom?**

- Candy
- Small items (ex. pencils, erasers, stickers, etc.)
- Classroom privileges(ex. Computer time, homework pass,etc.)
- Positive note home
- Other

**4. Which extrinsic rewards most effectively motivate students?**

	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Very Effective
Candy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Certificates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Items (ex. pencils, erasers, stickers, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classroom Privilege (ex. Computer time, homework pass,etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Positive Note Home	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**5. How often do you give rewards in your classroom?**

- Daily
- More than once a week
- Weekly
- About every two weeks
- About once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

**6. I give extrinsic rewards to:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Motivate students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduce Negative Behaviors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increase Academic Success	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**7. Which of the following describes the context in which reward systems are used with your students?**

- Class Token Economy (chips, tickets, etc.)
- Sticker Charts
- A reward is given upon completion of a goal set by the student
- Reward systems are not used in my classroom.
- Other

**8. In my classroom, reward systems are used with:**

- Individual students only
- Whole class only
- Reward systems are not used in my classroom
- Other

**9. Directions: For questions 9-20, please choose the response that best describes your beliefs about rewards.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
9. Reward systems are most effective when students determine their own goals for success.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. The use of extrinsic rewards ultimately leads to decreased intrinsic motivation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Rewards increase student participation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Students should be rewarded for good behavior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Students should be rewarded for academic performance.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. Students are more motivated by tangible rewards than by verbal or written praise.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Specific verbal or written praise is frequently given to students in my classroom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. Rewards systems are too time consuming.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Reward systems are an effective strategy for managing disruptive behaviors.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. Reward systems increase academic success.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. Reward systems are more effective when a response cost is applied (ex. the reward can be lost for inappropriate behavior)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. Following school rules should be an expectation, not something to be rewarded for.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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