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RESEARCH PAPER

Role of Reward in Shaping Elementary Students' Perceived Interest in Studies: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Schools

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ABSTRACT

The research examined how reward practices could help in increasing the perceived interest in studies among students at the elementary school level with a comparison between the students in the public and the private schools under District Sialkot. The quantitative methodology and descriptive survey design were used, and a sample of 600 students was used to gather data in the form of a self-created questionnaire on reward practices. The results showed that the students in private schools portrayed a higher degree of reward practices than the students in the public schools held. Furthermore, there was a considerable positive correlation between reward practices and the interest of students in studies in the two sectors with the correlation being greater in the case of the private schools. The findings also showed that the perceived degree of reward practices was significantly different between the public and the private institutions. In sum, the paper has underscored the relevance of systematic reward systems in promoting motivation and academic participation among the elementary students. It is also suggested that the practice of rewards in the public schools be reinforced in order to increase the interest of the students and raise the learning outcomes.

Keywords: Reward Practices, Student Interest, Public Schools, Private Schools, Elementary Education, Motivation

Introduction

Middle The concept of student motivation has been known to be a decisive variable in the success of learning and academic success. In elementary levels, when students are building the basics in terms of their skills and understanding with regard to learning, it is especially important to keep them interested in learning. Reward systems are one of the highest strategies that teachers use to cope with the behavior and the academic performance of the students. Rewards- tangible, verbal or symbolic- are external motivators, which may stimulate students to do their work, engage in the classroom and maintain concentration (Cameron and Pierce, 1994). Nevertheless, the efficacy of rewards in influencing long-term motivation of students to learn remains a controversial issue among the educational researchers.

Behaviorist theories and especially the ones championed by B.F. Skinner focus on reinforcement as a behavior driving force. The laws of operant conditioning are that behaviors that are linked to rewards tend to repeat whereas those that are linked to punishments are less likely to happen (Skinner, 1965). Rewards in school (praise, good grades, certificates, and recognition) also serve as reinforcers and boost desirable academic behavior (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999). The results of research have continuously pointed to the fact that rewards may positively influence the short-term motivation and classroom attendance, as well as the level of student achievement (Hanus and Fox, 2015). Nevertheless, researchers warn that excessive use of extrinsic rewards can compromise intrinsic motivation and, hence, lower the level of students who are actually interested in learning (Deci and Ryan, 2013).

At elementary level, children are very sensitive to the external stimulation through praise, encouragement and physical incentives. These extrinsic reinforcements can usually be used as preliminary motivators until intrinsic motivation builds. Reward systems are used by teachers in both government and private schools to ensure that there is discipline, completion of homework, and improvement of classroom participation. Research indicates that social rewards (including praise and recognition) can be superior to material rewards to maintain interest because they can create a good relationship between teachers and students and develop self-esteem (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002). However, contexts in the culture and the institutions may affect the perception and usage of rewards.

There is a wide disparity between state and privately-owned schools in many developing nations, Pakistan being one of them in the areas of resources, instruction methods, and classroom management tactics. It is a fairly common perception that modern motivational techniques are more prevalent in the work of the private schools, whereas the public schools tend to depend more on the traditional methods of discipline and incentives. Such differences may condition the perception of rewards by the students and their effects on academic interest. Although reward systems have been widely used, there is a paucity of empirical studies that make a direct comparison of the role rewards have in the development of perceived interest of students in public and privately owned elementary school.

This study is important because it aims at the perceived interest of students and does not only consider the observable academic outcomes. Perceived interest is vital as it is considered to be the indication of intrinsic interest of students towards the learning process, and thus the long-term persistence and achievement in academics (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014). Exploring the effects of rewards among the students in the public and private school settings, this study is set to offer a solution to the effectiveness of motivational practices that can be successfully achieved to better the quality of education in the different sectors.

Therefore, the study will add to the literature available since it will not only examine the overall necessity of rewards in schooling but also the comparative effect of rewards in various school settings. Knowledge of these dynamics can inform policymakers, administrators, and teachers in the development of reward systems that can encourage long-term student engagement, lessen academic disengagement, and enhance a more desirable learning culture in the elementary schooling setting.

It is necessary to keep students interested in the process of studying at the elementary level so as to develop positive attitudes towards learning. In schools, rewards are common place to motivate students but their influence on long-term interest is a contested topic. Even though rewards can enhance interest and involvement, they can inhibit intrinsic motivation when overused. Reward systems have been used in both the public and the private schools in Pakistan, although the differences in practices cast doubt on their effectiveness in influencing the perceived interest of students to be interested in learning. Although they are widely used, very little research has compared the effect of rewards on student interest in school sectors. It is in the light of this gap that the study of the role of rewards in academic interest in elementary schools, both state and private schools, is warranted.

Literature Review

Reward has been noted to be a very important motivational instrument in learning institutions. Based on behaviorist theory of learning, especially the reinforcement model of learning (1965) by B. F. Skinner, rewards are applied to promote desired behaviors, e.g., attention, participation, and school performance. As behaviorists posit, when positive academic behavior is rewarded the likelihood of occurrence of such behavior becomes high.

The rewards can be implemented in different forms such as verbal praise, certificates, stars, tokens or physical rewards. Such rewards act as extrinsic stimuli and encourage learners to become more active in their learning (Slavin, 2011).

The literature in this regard confirms that reward systems are effective in promoting academic motivation. As shown by Hurlock (2021), children who were praised and given recognition as a result of their performance made great improvements as opposed to those who were not. In the same vein, Akin-Little et al. (2004) opined that when applied in a systematic way, extrinsic reward in the classroom enhances the number of tasks that get done and the number of students who turn up. Thus, rewards are an indispensable tool in establishing a conducive atmosphere of learning, especially during elementary level when students are more sensitive to the external rewards.

Perceived interest in learning is the degree of curiosity, enthusiasm, and desire of the students to study academic assignments. At elementary level where intrinsic motivation is yet to take form, rewards can aid the interest of the students in studies. Research shows that social rewards (praise, recognition) are particularly useful to increase the confidence and achievement feeling in the students. Physical rewards, e.g. tokens and points, can also be used to promote regular study behavior, particularly with younger children who favor tangible rewards (Sugai and Horner, 2009).

Nevertheless, the nature and the manner of rewards have a great effect on the perceived interest. Rewards are anticipated and they are associated with accomplishment of simple tasks, they can destroy intrinsic motivation. Conversely, rewards that are based on performance and recognize the efforts and achievement of students can also boost the self-esteem and interest of the student in the long term (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999). These results point to the necessity of teachers to build reward mechanisms that promote real interaction, not obedience.

Rewards can be applied differently in public schools and private schools because of the differences in resources, school culture and teacher practices. Ching (2012) observed that in a lot of cases, private schools introduce organized reward systems, including certificates, star charts, recognition ceremonies, and so on that makes an environment rather competitive but motivating. According to Awan and Hussain (2020), in the context of public schools, where the number of students served in a classroom is relatively large, and resources are limited, verbal recognition of a student or the classroom in general is used more frequently compared to the use of a reward system.

It is also an empirical study that indicates that students in such contexts come out diverse in their perceptions of rewards. Maphosa (2019) discovered that learners in private schools were more likely to state that they were satisfied with reward systems than learners in the public schools, and this was due to the fact that they could notice more frequent and apparent incentives on academic work. These disparities highlight the significance of comparative research to establish whether the reward systems are as effective in the public and the private school setting or not, particularly at elementary level where motivation techniques play a decisive role in academic behaviors.

Even though there is substantial body of literature that indicates the power of awards in motivating and regulating the behavior of students, there is not much research that directly relates to the effects of reward on students perceived interest in elementary studies. Further, there is still limited literature on comparative research on public versus private schools, especially in the South Asian setup. This gap highlights the necessity to study the role of reward practices in the interests of students in learning in various learning environments and thus provide information on more effective motivation in classrooms.

Material and Methods

In this research, the quantitative and descriptive survey was used to examine the role of reward and punishment in student perceived interest in elementary level study in both the public and private schools of District Sialkot. The target population was included in the form of all students in both sectors of elementary school, and the population that was available consisted of students of 20 schools of the public sector and 20 schools of the private sector. The sample was chosen using a three-stage stratified random sampling method to achieve representativeness because it was not possible to investigate the entire population (Creswell et al., 2017). The sample was chosen using a random sampling method in the first stage, whereby 40 schools (20 public and 20 private) were selected; in the second stage, the same sample was further broken down into male and female samples (10 schools in each section), and in the final stage, a sample of 600 students was selected, which consisted of 300 males and 300 females with a balanced representation of both genders in the sample of public and private schools respectively. This approach was deemed to be suitable because it promotes generalizability and making of standardized and quantifiable data about the perceptions and experiences of students (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2006).

Instrumentation

Data were gathered by use of a self-constructed questionnaire that exclusively addressed the relevance of reward in influencing the interest of students to studies in the elementary level. The measure had 15 items that were associated with the typical reward mechanisms in schools and measured on 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree). The questionnaire was drafted both in Urdu and English so that it will be understood and easily accessed. Content and face validity were determined by reviewing the content by experts and making required amendments to the language and phrasing of items (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012). Additional confirmation was done by the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) and the reward instrument was found to have a high level of validity with a CVI of 0.88 (Lynn, 2011). To ensure reliability, the item consistency and logical continuity were upheld (Nunan, 1999; Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012). The questionnaires were distributed by the researcher to the students personally to maintain quality and uniformity in the collection of the data.

Data Analysis

The data collected were coded, tabulated and analyzed using SPSS version 24. The role of reward in perceived interest in studies at the elementary level among students in public and private school was tested using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The level of reward practices perceived by male and female students in the two sectors was determined using descriptive statistics which included mean and standard deviation. Independent sample t-tests were used in order to test whether there were significant differences in perceptions between males and female students as well as between students in public and private schools. These comparisons have illuminated how practices that affect the reward system can affect the interest of students towards the studies in various types of schools and genders.

Table 1
Perceived Mean Score of Reward Practices at Elementary Level in Public and Private Sectors

Sector	N statistics	Mean statistics	Std.
Public	300	63.06	12.762
Private	300	71.83	9.612

According to table 1, elementary school students in the private sector (M = 71.83, SD = 9.61) reported a better perceived mean score of reward practices than the school teachers/students in the public sector (M = 63.06, SD = 12.76). The difference shows that

the perceptions of reward practices show that it is more often and more effectively practiced in private schools compared to the perceptions of primary and secondary schools. Though both sectors show that there are reward-based strategies, the fact that the score of the private sector is comparatively higher indicates that institutions have a greater focus on students as a motivational resource.

Table 2
Relationship between Reward Practices and Students' Perceived Interest towards Study at Public Sector

Variables	R	P
Total Perceived Interest	—	—
Reward Practices (Public)	.51**	.000

Table 2 indicates that there was a strong positive relationship between reward practices and perceived interest among students of study in the public sector (r =.51, p=.000). It shows that the more reward practices there were, the more interest in studies the students had. The middle value of the association indicates that reward practices are significant in encouraging the involvement of students in the learning activities at the elementary level.

Table 3
Relationship between Reward Practices and Students' Perceived Interest towards Study at Private Sector (N=300)

Variables	R	P
Total Perceived Interest	—	—
Reward Practices (Private)	.49**	.000

A statistically significant positive relationship was observed between reward practices and perceived interest of students in the study in the private sector (r = .49, p=.000) as shown in Table 3. This means that with increased reward practices, there is a tendency of higher interest among students in their studies. The relationship was moderate which implies that the role of reward practices in determining the study related interest of the students in the private schools is important but not absolute.

Table 4
Difference In the Mean Score of Perceived Level of Reward Practices in Students' Interest towards Study at Elementary Level between Public and Private Sector

Reward instrument	Sector	N	Mean Statistics	Std.	T	Df	P value
Reward practices	Public	300	62.05	14.735	7.134	598	.000
	Private	300	70.85	11.547			

As indicated in Table 4, there was a significant difference in mean perceived reward practice scores regarding the interest of students in the study of elementary school students in public and private schools. Students in the private schools (M = 70.85, SD = 11.55) had much higher reported levels of perceived reward practices than the students in the public schools (M = 62.05, SD = 14.74), t (598) = 7.134, p <.001. This implies that the element of reward practices is more emphasized in the institutions of private schools, and this might help in creating more interest in the studies among the students.

Discussion

Results of this research have shown reward practices have a significant effect on the perceived interest of students in studies at elementary level, and the effect is even greater in private schools than in the public ones. This coincides with the postulation of Deci and Ryan (2013), and it highlights that external reward, when used in the right manner may boost intrinsic motivation and learning involvement. The greater mean scores and stronger relationships in the case of private schools could be an indication of the fact that the organized and regular application of rewards helps create more motivating learning

conditions. These finding are also congruent with other prior studies which have indicated that physical and verbal rewards like praise, certificates or recognition can boost the enthusiasm of students, their confidence and academic engagement (Cameron and Pierce, 2002). On the other hand, the comparatively moderate score of the public schools implies that reward practices might not be systematically used, which restricts its effectiveness in increasing interest. The results present here are in line with Han and Yin (2016) who maintained that cultural and institutional variations in reward practices influence the motivational results of students. In general, the research indicates the importance of well-calculated reward measures in the fostering of long-term motivation in the study of students, especially when reinforced by favorable classroom management.

Conclusions

According to the analysis, it can be said that the reward practices are better implemented in a private type of school compared to a public type of school as the mean scores of students' perceptions are higher. It was found that there existed a moderate positive relationship between the reward practices and interest of the students in the studies in the public schools whereas stronger positive relationship between reward practices and student interest in the studies was found in the private schools indicating that rewards have stronger motivational influence in the private sector. Moreover, the independent t-test revealed statistically significant difference between the public and the private schools, as the former exhibited lower reward practices. In general, the results indicate that reward practices are key elements that can increase the interests of students in studies, the influence of which is greater in the non-government sector.

Recommendations

As the practice of perceived rewards was higher, and students' interests were more intense in the case of the private schools, more organized reward systems (e.g., certificates, praise, recognition) have to be implemented in the schools to motivate the students and help them develop positive academic behaviors. Non-material rewards like verbal praise, recognition of effort, and responsibility should be encouraged by the teachers because they have been found to enhance intrinsic motivation and long-lasting interest in learning. Training workshops should be organized by the educational authorities to train teachers in effective reward practices to balance extrinsic and intrinsic motivation so that rewards boost student engagement and not devastate it. Reward should be incorporated in the academic system and the same should be prevalent in all schools, especially in the case of public schools, where the disparity was compelling.

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