

# Review of the literature about the functions, values, research strategies and behaviors of rewards

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**Abstract:** This study aims to review the literature on rewards. Rewards are positive evaluations of students, primarily based on their behavior and performance. Rewards can provide psychological satisfaction to students, motivating them to strive for excellence. Some scholars argue that rewards represent the ‘compensation’ received after completing a task. Researchers have categorized rewards differently based on various perspectives. In Christopher's study, rewards are classified into two types: material (external) rewards and non-material (internal) rewards. Some scholars identify five types of rewards: direct economic, indirect economic, relational, professional, and content-based. Others categorize rewards into four types: edible, tangible, activity-based, and social rewards. The first objective of this study is to identify the functions and values of rewards. The second objective is to analyze the research strategies and behaviors of rewards. Text analysis method was used to achieve the objectives of this study. The qualitative data was analyzed on the platform of thematic coding. From the first objective, the finding shows that the functions of rewards are based on two major categories according to their nature and impact on students. The finding from the second objective shows that behaviors of elementary school teachers during Chinese language classes identifies common issues: primarily, the orientation of praise is results-focused, lacking personal orientation; there is an overemphasis on material rewards in the early grades; and teachers' verbal praise lacks authenticity and specificity. The implication from this study stated that rewards motivate the student receiving it to continue the behavior or action that got them their prize, but some student will want a piece of the action as well.

**Keywords:** Review of the literature, the functions of rewards, the values of rewards, research strategies and behaviors of rewards

## 1. Definition and Connotation of Rewards

The ‘Encyclopedia of Psychology’ states that rewards are positive evaluations of students, primarily based on their behavior and performance. Rewards can provide psychological satisfaction to students, motivating them to strive for excellence. Some scholars argue that rewards represent the ‘compensation’ received after completing a task (Yusuf & Mala, 2022). Rewards affirm, praise, and encourage behaviors, serving as both material and spiritual incentives. In educational contexts, teachers commonly use rewards as motivational tools, employing various methods tailored to their purposes.

Rewards have a reinforcing effect on behavior, a principle first established through animal experiments, which laid the foundation for many theories. Thorndike, a behaviorist, argued that the essence of learning lies in the formation of "stimulus-response" connections, governed by the Law of Effect: when learners respond to stimuli and achieve satisfactory outcomes, the connection strengthens; conversely, unsatisfactory results weaken it (Anggriani, 2023). Satisfactory outcomes are synonymous with rewards. This perspective was later expanded upon by Skinner, whose new behaviorism gained wide acceptance, asserting that stimuli enhancing the likelihood of behavior occurrence constitute reinforcement. Rewards, as external stimuli, can reinforce individual behaviors, thereby impacting psychological and behavioral dimensions.

Bandura's motivation theory suggests that both outcome and antecedent factors affect individual behavior, with outcome factors – reinforcement - divided into three categories: direct reinforcement (via rewards and punishments), vicarious reinforcement (learned through observing role models), and self-reinforcement (self-evaluation and supervision enhancing learning behavior frequency).

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In addition to behavioral theories, the expectancy theory developed by Vroom (1964) provides insight into the psychological mechanisms that underpin the motivation to achieve. Expectancy theory posits that individuals are motivated to act based on their expectations of the outcomes of their behavior. Rewards, in this context, serve not only as reinforcing agents but also as significant determinants of student motivation and engagement. When students perceive that their efforts will lead to valued rewards, their motivation to engage in learning activities increases (Schunk, 2012).

Moreover, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations play critical roles in how rewards are perceived. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) distinguishes between intrinsic rewards, which are derived from personal satisfaction and enjoyment, and extrinsic rewards, which include tangible incentives such as grades and prizes. Their research indicates that while extrinsic rewards can effectively motivate initial engagement, excessive reliance on them may undermine intrinsic motivation, suggesting a balance should be maintained in educational settings.

Further, the social cognitive theory posited by Bandura highlights the importance of observational learning in the context of rewards. Bandura's motivation theory suggests that both outcome and antecedent factors affect individual behavior, with outcome factors – reinforcement – classified into three categories: direct reinforcement (via rewards and punishments), vicarious reinforcement (learned through observing role models), and self-reinforcement (self-evaluation and supervision enhancing learning behavior frequency). This theory emphasizes that individuals can be motivated not only by the rewards they receive for their behavior but also by observing others (e.g., peers or educators) being rewarded for similar behaviors, highlighting the importance of a positive reinforcement culture within educational environments.

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks underscore that rewards are multifaceted tools in education that impact student motivation, behavior, and learning outcomes. By understanding the underlying principles of rewards and their varied implications, educators can implement more effective strategies to enhance student engagement and academic success.

## 1.1 Types of Rewards

Researchers have categorized rewards differently based on various perspectives. In Christopher's study, rewards are classified into two types: material (external) rewards and non-material (internal) rewards (Razafindrakoto et al., 2023). Some scholars identify five types of rewards: direct economic, indirect economic, relational, professional, and content-based. Others categorize rewards into four types: edible, tangible, activity-based, and social rewards. Furthermore, some scholars differentiate rewards into candy rewards, social rewards, and token rewards (Clingman et al., 1977).

While the classification of reward types varies according to different criteria, a common understanding among most scholars is the distinction between material rewards and spiritual rewards. Material rewards include tangible items like stickers, stars, and money, while spiritual rewards encompass praise and feedback. Additionally, scholars propose various classification standards based on their observational studies.

Ryan et al. (1983) classifies rewards into task-related and non-task-related, with the former awarded for completing specific tasks and the latter being unrelated to participants' behaviors during experiments. Hidi (2016) differentiates rewards into expected and unexpected, positing that unexpected rewards have more positive effects and fewer adverse impacts on students. Sargani et al., (2021) categorizes rewards into explicit and implicit, with explicit rewards impacting students' self-efficacy and implicit rewards affecting their worldview, outlook on life, and values.

Blair & Law (2024) classifies rewards based on their alignment with tasks into homogeneous and heterogeneous rewards, recommending that specific implementations should be context dependent. Additionally, rewards can be divided into individual and collective types based on the target of the reward.

Moreover, (Ainslie, 1975) suggests categorizing rewards into public and private based on spatial dimensions and into immediate and delayed rewards based on temporal dimensions. The academic discourse on the classification of reward types is extensive; the above only represents a fraction of scholars' viewpoints. It is evident that due to differing

focal points, scholars propose varied classification standards, although there may be intersections in their categorizations. After analyzing scholars' proposed reward types, the author summarizes them in the following Table 1.

**Table 1.** Types of Rewards

Content	Classification Criteria	Type		
Types of Rewards	Nature	Material reward / Mental reward		
	Object	Personal reward / Group reward		
	Temporal dimension	Instant reward / Delayed reward		
	Spatial dimension	Publicity reward / Non-public reward		
	Whether promises are fulfilled	Expectant reward / Unexpected rewards		
	Task	Task-related	Task-based reward / Non task rewards	
		Consistency with the nature of the task	Homogeneous reward / Heterogeneity reward	
	Orientation	Content orientation	Personal orientation reward	
			Process oriented reward	
			Outcome oriented reward	
Attribution orientation	Ability oriented reward / Effort oriented reward			
Form of expression		Explicit reward / Implicit reward		

## 2. Section Functions and Values of Rewards

Goldstein & Brooks (2008) argues that fair reward principles help students develop a correct understanding of resource distribution and regulate their social behaviors. Furthermore, rewards stimulate student motivation and foster innovative thinking.

Ryan et al. (1983) identified two primary functions of rewards: informational and controlling. Deci et al. (2017) also affirm these two functions in the educational domain. The controlling function refers to teachers using rewards as incentives to shape student behavior towards desired actions. The informational function, or feedback function, involves teachers providing students with fundamental information about their learning or behaviors, helping them recognize their strengths and weaknesses, thus enabling targeted strategies to improve learning efficiency and promote positive behaviors.

Tamir et al. (2018) proposed that rewards can facilitate students' social development while also activating their motivation. Rewards reinforce positive behaviors during children's socialization processes, aiding in moral judgment and helping students clearly understand their actions. Additionally, rewards can bring students joy and positive emotional experiences, enhancing their willingness to engage in subsequent activities.

Based on the insights from various scholars, the author classifies the functions of rewards into two major categories. This is according to the nature and impact on students, as summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Reward function

Content	Classification Criteria	Type
Reward function	Purpose of reward	Control function / Information function
	Effect of reward	Socialized function / Personalized function

## 3. Research on Strategies and Behaviors of Rewards

Whether as reinforcement, control, discipline, or management tools, these concepts merely interpret the role of rewards in educational practice. Durkheim posits that actions acquire true meaning and value only when the actor does not anticipate the regularity of the rewards associated with these actions. In other words, the significance of rewards lies in their uncertainty and ambiguity; if rewards lack this characteristic, they become commercialized, akin to being labeled

with a price. Anderson & Howland (2015) analyzes the meaning of praise, suggesting that it fulfills human needs, manifesting as needs for existence, recognition, status, and intimacy.

In a sense, as individuals age and mature physically and mentally, the effort students invest in learning reflects a transcendence from the tangible to the intangible, from the physical to the spiritual. Henderlong (2002) further differentiates the meanings of rewards and praise into explicit and implicit meanings, indicating that the effects of rewards are determined not solely by the characteristics of the rewards themselves, but are significantly influenced by the methods of delivery. Therefore, he argues that continuous rewards should not be given even when students consistently perform well.

Researchers based on modern cognitive evaluation theory have suggested that teachers need to understand students' psychological needs when applying rewards, experiment with various forms of rewards, use rewards judiciously according to context, consider internal differences, be aware of peer influences, and guard against reward dependency (Molnár & Csapó, 2019). Furthermore, from the perspective of social interaction theory, it is argued that only by clarifying the value orientation of rewards and promoting the transformation of students' external motivations into internal ones can effective communication improve the impact of rewards in education (Kosheleva & Villaverde, 2018). It is generally considered reasonable to allocate rewards based on students' knowledge levels (such as exam scores); however, experiments abroad have shown that contrary to this seemingly intuitive conclusion, placing more emphasis on the effort put into the process of earning rewards leads to better student outcomes. The question of how to leverage rewards effectively to help students achieve their desires is crucial, highlighting the close relationship between motivation and rewards. Some scholars propose that immediate rewards are more effective than delayed ones. When rewards are delayed, certain stimuli, symbolic responses, or symbolic rewards are necessary to bridge the gap by associating immediate and appropriate responses with the eventual rewards (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

How rewards can effectively motivate and resonate with students is a pressing issue. Some scholars believe that the use of rewards requires artistry, providing clear guiding principles for educational managers in teaching and classroom management, which helps to maximize the impact of rewards. Others emphasize the need to use rewards cautiously and reasonably, preventing misuse so that rewards genuinely support teaching, following principles such as "targeted," "motivational," and "hierarchical." The purpose of rewards is to promote student development, adhering to the principles of fairness and justice. Moreover, rewards should not target individuals but rather clearly highlight the good performance of the learners, with the effects of rewards reflected in awakening learners' intrinsic motivation for self-improvement (Giles-Mathis, 2023).

Sigalingging et al. (2023) suggests that rewards are a way for teachers to motivate students in educational practice. However, if teachers possess weak theoretical knowledge regarding rewards, their behaviors may easily become incorrect or unreasonable. He argues that teachers must accurately learn the meanings and functions of rewards, master their application characteristics, and continuously reflect on the effects of rewards in practice to avoid pitfalls in reward behavior and enhance reward strategies, thereby realizing the true value of rewards.

Liu & Gillies (2021) examines the praise behaviors of elementary school teachers during Chinese language classes and identifies common issues: primarily, the orientation of praise is results-focused, lacking personal orientation; there is an overemphasis on material rewards in the early grades; and teachers' verbal praise lacks authenticity and specificity. Makhuzeni & Barkhuizen (2015) describes the diverse forms of "rewards" used by Western elementary school teachers, which extend beyond traditional material rewards to include options such as changing seating arrangements, canceling homework for the night, or extending playtime. Such rewards respect students' ideas and meet their needs, enabling rewards to realize their practical value. In the study of reward strategies, effective application should consider students' individual differences, employ varying methods for different targets, fully stimulate students' intrinsic motivations, emphasize student initiative in learning, reduce prior commitments, and maintain flexible reward methods to sustain students' anticipation of rewards.

#### 4. Conclusion

The concept of rewards, types of rewards are crucial to identify and analysis the functions and values of rewards and the research. The functions of rewards are based on two major categories according to their nature and impact on students. From the analysis, behaviors of elementary school teachers during Chinese language classes identifies common issues: primarily, the orientation of praise is results-focused, lacking personal orientation; there is an overemphasis on material rewards in the early grades; and teachers' verbal praise lacks authenticity and specificity.

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