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## **Young schoolchildren's representations of the use of rewards as tools for managing learning and relational behaviors**

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**Abstract.** This study aims to identify the sets of representations that primary pupils associate with rewards as tools for managing learning and relationship behaviours. The methodological design, derived from this intention, features a key element: a survey-based research. The main hypothesis of the study can be summarized as follows: symbolic and social rewards are tools frequently used by primary school teachers. The research involved 30 fourth-grade students. The results obtained confirm some of the formulated hypotheses, allowing the representation of a relevant image associated by students with rewards.

**Keywords.** Primary education, primary pupils, social rewards, symbolic rewards, rewards through activities rite your keywords here.

### **1. Introduction**

When students are determined to learn only to avoid punishments, meet parental expectations, or receive rewards, extrinsic motivation is present. In this way, learning is practiced only to achieve certain external objectives, not as an end in itself (Cace, C., 2006). In the long run, students who are extrinsically motivated may have lower results compared to intrinsically motivated students; those in the former category often achieve poorer results (Pânișoară, I., O., Manolescu, M., 2019, p.685). Rewards are recommended when they are given for the effort made, rather than for the results obtained.

### **2. Reward. A short „word”**

As "strategies or actions that ensure students' performance during schooling" (Sri, A.S., 2020, p. 253), rewards can be defined as "gifts given to someone to obtain recognition for a service



or a gesture" (Le Petit Larousse Illustré, 2017). Additionally, Osterrieth (1988) emphasizes that from the perspective of the teaching staff, rewards aim to provide material or moral advantages intended to improve desirable behaviour (Perez, K., 2019, p. 5).

In a motivation typological symmetry (based on the source criterion), rewards can be external as well as internal, both serving as useful tools for teachers in managing and stabilizing the classroom atmosphere, academically and/or interactionally. While external rewards include elements such as grades, diplomas, and distinctions, providing short-term satisfaction, internal rewards refer to the satisfaction from exploring curiosity, feelings of achievement and personal fulfillment, as well as the pleasure associated with successfully completing tasks or standards set by either the teacher or the individual (Stan, E., 2004, p. 29).

Rewards can also be offered in both intangible (symbolic) and tangible forms: "Rewards are material or immaterial benefits obtained after achieving certain objectives or specific behaviours, which may include salaries, bonuses, public recognition, or personal satisfaction. These rewards can come from both external sources, such as organizations or individuals, and internal sources, such as personal achievements or the fulfillment of individual values" (Smith, J. D., Johnson, A. B., 2020, p. 124).

### **1.1. Theories on reward(s)**

The justification for using rewards can be made from different psychological perspectives, with behaviourism and organizational psychology being two such benchmarks.

According to Desmet and Pourtois (2002), behaviourism is a theory that asserts that a behaviour is influenced by its consequences. This approach focuses on two principles of learning: classical conditioning and operant conditioning (Perez, K., 2019, p. 7). The operant conditioning theory (behaviourism), developed by B.F. Skinner, operates on the idea that reinforcement provided after a certain behaviour increases its strength (Baranek, L.K., 1996, p. 11).

Equity theory (from organizational psychology) balances the effort people put in with the rewards they receive, thereby adjusting their behaviour to maintain the principle of equity in relation to others (Adams, J.S., 1965).

According to research in the field, the effectiveness of the use of rewards depends on several factors: rewards stimulate student motivation when they are used to encourage the adoption of new behaviours or when they are offered unexpectedly, and even when they are offered for progress or an achievement (Petrovai, D., Petrică, S., 2013, p.62).

### **1.2. Types of rewards**

Effective teacher(s) resort to this method to demonstrate support and care for their students, thus achieving a more positive relationship with both students and parents (Bear, G.G., Homan, J., Morales, S., 2018, p. 2). Thanks to rewards, students become more motivated and enthusiastic about learning. They find learning activities more enjoyable, and the content becomes easier when they know their efforts are appreciated (Sri, A.S., 2020, p. 254).

The use of rewards, especially tangible ones, can have a long-term negative effect on students' intrinsic motivation and even on their academic performance. However, praise is presented as having the ability to increase intrinsic motivation under certain circumstances. By identifying these circumstances, teachers can effectively use praise, which must be sincere and



specific, to stimulate excellence among students. Not all forms of rewards have the same impact on student motivation (Wong, M., Thomson, M.M., 2014, pp. 105-114).

Social rewards encourage positive behaviours and efforts made by students without involving material rewards; they reinforce and consolidate the motivation for academic success. These can include praise, pats, collective or individual appreciations, and other forms of recognition that encourage and motivate students.

Vianin (2014) argues that symbolic rewards in the form of verbal appreciations develop students' motivation for learning more than those in the form of tokens, stickers, or prizes. Verbal rewards include reactions such as compliments, praise, and verbal messages that express positive appreciation of achievements or behaviours (Perez, K., 2019, p. 6).

Tangible rewards and activity-based rewards are directly given to students by teachers without using tokens or other objects. Intangible rewards are for activities that make students happier, such as becoming a line leader or teacher's assistant, serving as a team leader in activities, or having certain privileges that make students feel special (Perez, K., 2019, p. 7).

### **3. Empirical investigation**

The study aims to identify the sets of representations that primary students associate with rewards as tools for managing learning and relational behaviours.

#### *a. The objectives:*

1. Identify the causes that students associate with the use of rewards;
2. Identify the types of rewards and the frequency with which students experience them in the school environment;
3. Identify the positive and negative effects on learning behaviours that students associate with various types of rewards;
4. Identify the positive and negative effects on relational behaviours that students associate with various types of rewards;

#### *b. Hypotheses*

1. For primary students, rewards represent practices with a positive impact on learning behaviours.
2. For primary students, rewards represent practices with a positive impact on relational behaviours.
3. Symbolic and social rewards are tools frequently used by primary school teachers.
4. In the opinion of primary students, symbolic and social rewards are predominantly caused by aspects related to learning behaviours.
5. In the opinion of primary students, activity-based rewards are predominantly caused by aspects related to learning behaviours.

#### *c. Methodology*

A survey was used. It consists in 20 items: 16 closed, 2 open, and 2 mixed items. The items corresponding to Objective 1 are items 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 17; to Objective 2, items 2, 7, and 16; to Objective 3, items 8, 9, 10, and 11; and to Objective 4, items 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, and 20.



The responses were processed using the application Excel, extracting statistical indicators such as percentages, absolute frequencies, and arithmetic means.

## Results

The data obtained following the survey allowed the creation of a relevant image associated by the surveyed students with symbolic, social, and activity-based rewards. Additionally, some of the hypotheses were confirmed, while others yielded surprising results.

The students' responses recognize verbal appreciation and highlighting achievements as the most frequent ways of expressing rewards in the classroom (15%). The least frequent are reducing the number or amount of homework and receiving tokens/badges (11%):

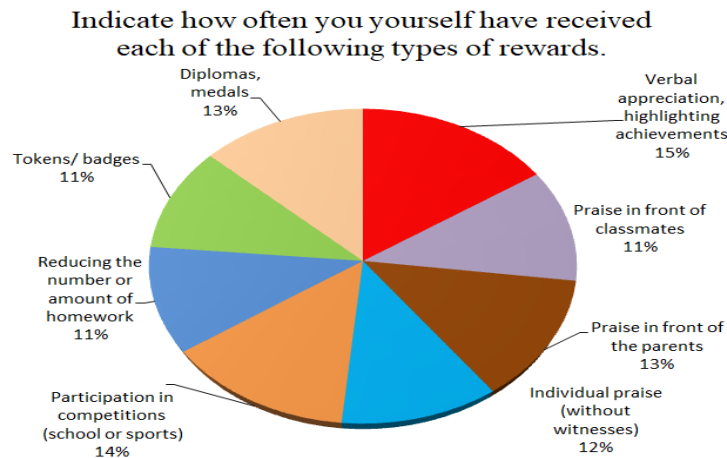


Figure 1. Responses regarding the frequency of receiving various types of symbolic rewards. Percentages.

The students' responses indicate appreciative smiles as the most frequent way of expressing rewards in the classroom (23%). The least frequent are reducing the number or amount of homework (11%) and the teacher giving special attention and praise in front of the classmates (15%):

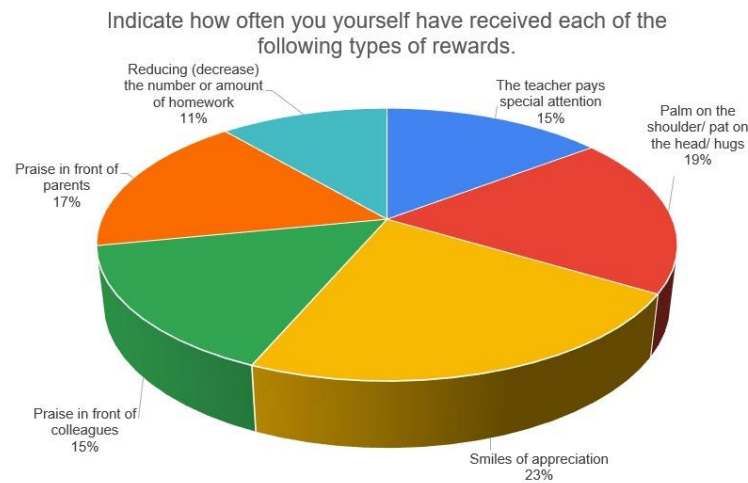


Figure 2. Responses regarding the frequency of receiving various types of social rewards. Percentages

Students' responses allowed the identification of the top two preferences: participating in relaxing activities outside the school (with an average value of 4.47) and participating in competitions (with an average value of 4.43). The lowest averages were recorded for rewards such as displaying their name on the class board/various posters (3.43) and praise in front of their classmates (average of 3.60):

For each of the following types of rewards: indicate the measure of your preference

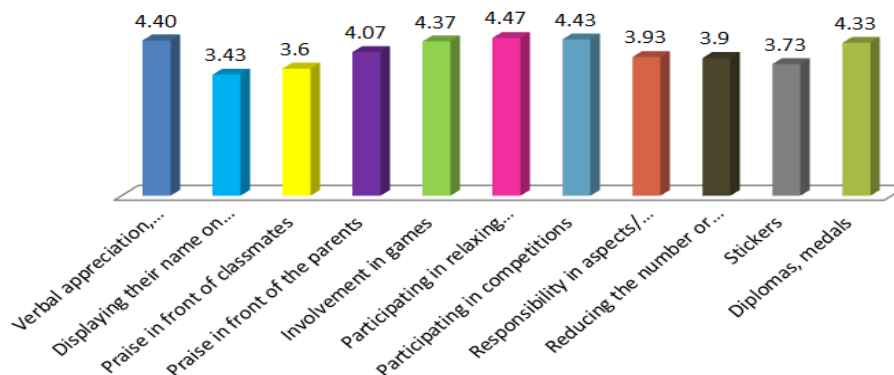


Figure 3. Responses regarding preferences for various types of symbolic rewards. Arithmetic mean

Students' responses indicated a preference for appreciative smiles (with an average value of 4.13). Conversely, the lowest averages were for reducing the amount of homework (average of 2.50) and receiving special attention from the teacher (average of 2.83):

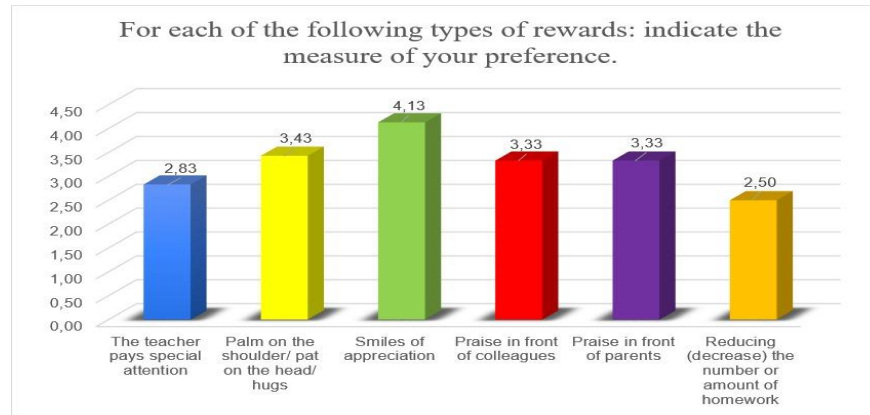


Figure 4. Responses regarding preferences for various types of social rewards. Arithmetic mean

Regarding the situations associated with the most relevant symbolic rewards and activity based ones, it is highlighted that rule compliance has the strongest and consistent impact on each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the four main types of rewards: praise in front of classmates, involvement in fun and relaxing activities outside of school, responsibility in aspects/elements of class life, and receiving medals/certificates. For analytical example: rule compliance is the main behaviour that generates responsibility in aspects/elements of class life. Additionally, appropriate behaviour in relation with the teacher is the main reason that generates rewards such as involvement in fun and relaxing activities outside of school.

Appropriate behaviour in relation with classmates represents the cause with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) for receiving a medal/certificate or medals/certificates:

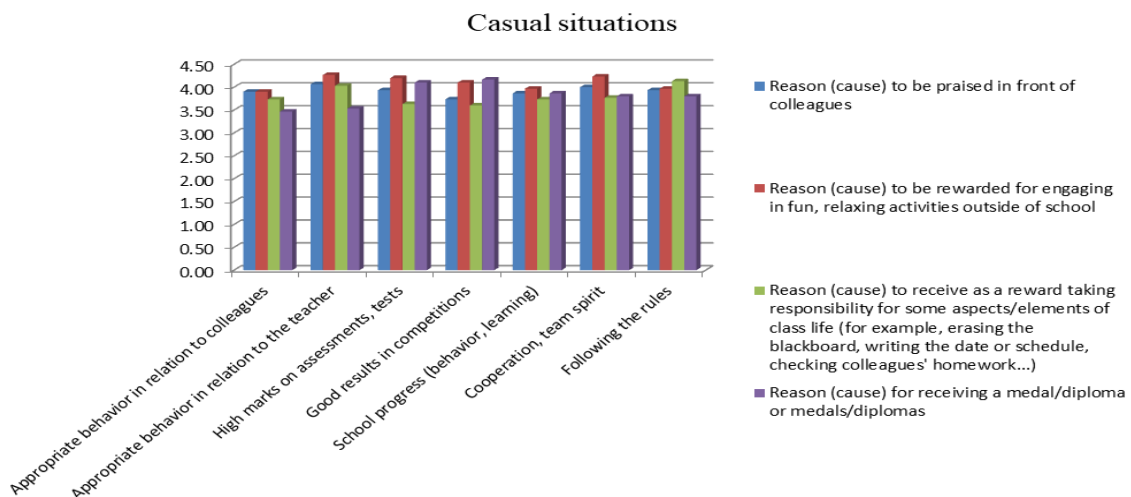


Figure 5. Responses regarding the situations and causes of symbolic rewards. Arithmetic mean



Regarding the situations associated with the most relevant social rewards, it is highlighted that rule compliance has the strongest and consistent impact for each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the four main types of rewards: praise in front of classmates and parents, physical contact, and appreciative smiles.

For analytical example: rule compliance is the main behaviour that generates praise in front of classmates and rewards expressed through physical contact (hugging, patting, etc.). Additionally, good results in competitions are the main behaviours that generate appreciative smiles and praise in front of parents. Appropriate behaviour in relation with classmates represents the cause with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) for praise in front of classmates, as well as for rewards expressed through physical contact (hugging, patting, etc.):

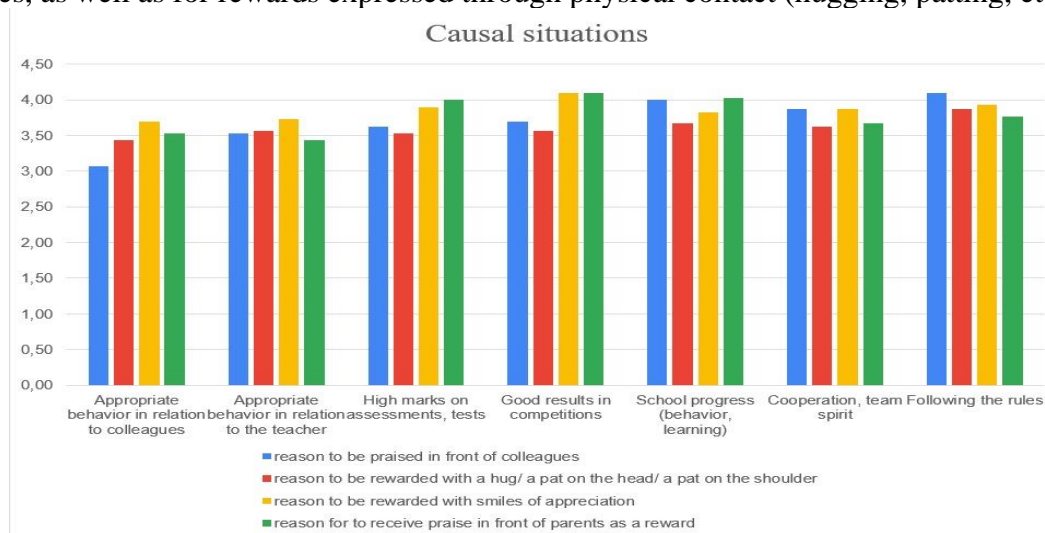


Figure 6. Responses regarding the situations and causes of social rewards. Arithmetic mean

Regarding the positive effects associated with the most relevant symbolic rewards and activity based ones, it is highlighted that better academic results have the strongest impact on each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the main types of rewards analyzed: praise in front of classmates or parents, involvement in fun, relaxing activities outside of school, responsibilities in aspects/elements of class life, and receiving medals/certificates.

For analytical example: better academic results are the main effects that generate praise in front of classmates or parents. Additionally, the feeling of self-worth is valued both through praise in front of classmates or parents, as well as through involvement in fun and relaxing activities outside of school.

Curiosity represents the effect with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) for receiving a medal/certificate or medals/certificates:

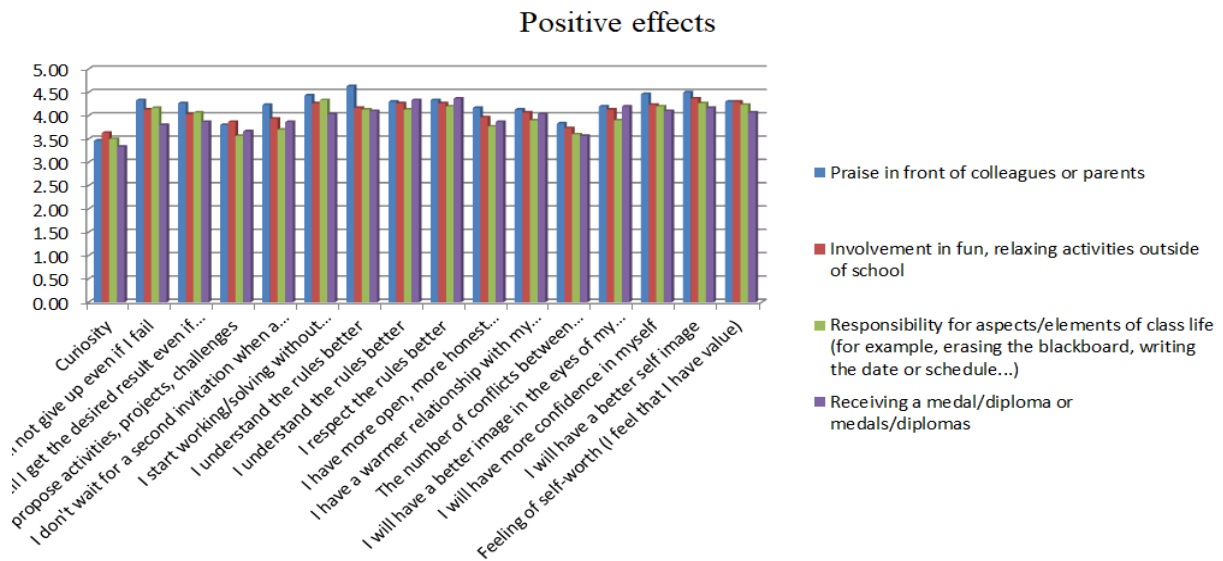


Figure 7. Responses regarding the positive effects of symbolic rewards. Arithmetic mean

Regarding the positive effects associated with the most relevant social rewards, it is highlighted that starting work without delay has the strongest impact on each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the four main types of rewards: praise in front of classmates and parents, physical contact, and appreciative smiles.

For analytical example: starting work without delay is the main effect that generates praise in front of classmates. Additionally, self-confidence is cultivated both through praise in front of classmates and through physical contact (hugs, pats, etc.).

Curiosity represents the effect with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) for praise in front of classmates:

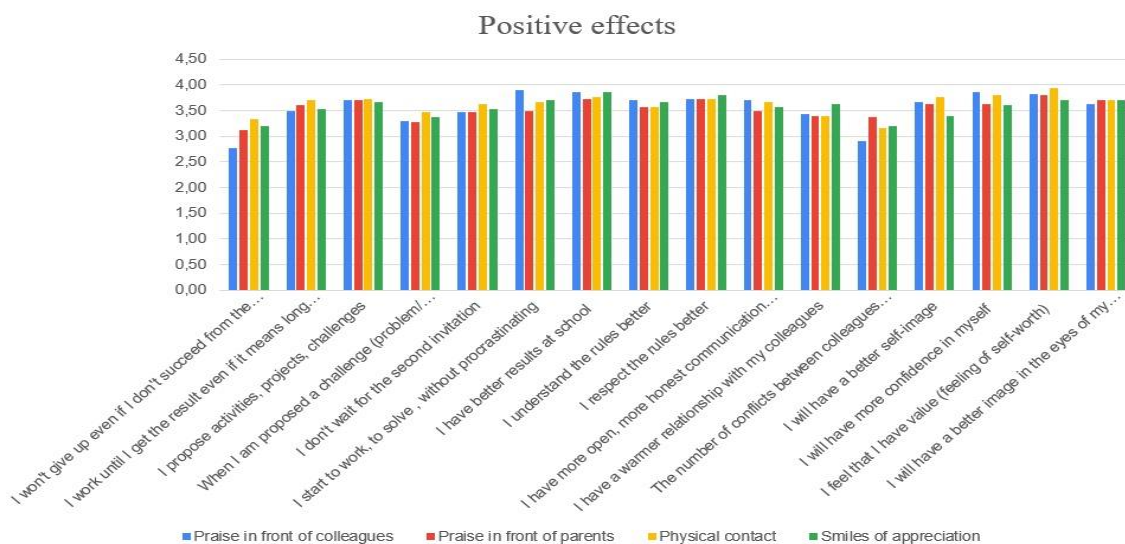


Figure 8. Responses regarding the positive effects of social rewards. Arithmetic mean



Regarding the negative effects associated with the most relevant symbolic rewards and activity based ones, it is highlighted that differences between classmates have the strongest impact on each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the four main types of rewards: praise in front of classmates or parents, involvement in fun and relaxing activities outside of school, responsibilities in aspects/elements of class life, and receiving medals/certificates. For analytical example: differences between classmates represent the main effect that generates praise in front of classmates or parents. Additionally, the risk of self-overestimation/self-overevaluation is generated both through responsibilities in aspects/elements of class life and receiving a medal/certificate or medals/certificates.

Indifference/disinterest represents the effect with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) on being made responsible for aspects/elements of class life:

### Negative effects

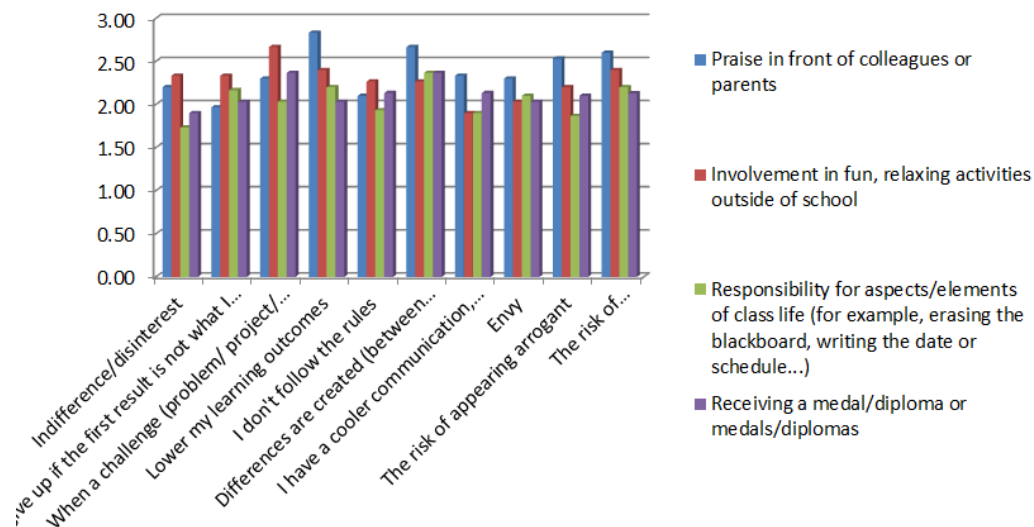


Figure 9. Responses regarding the negative effects of symbolic rewards. Arithmetic mean

Regarding the negative effects associated with the most relevant social rewards, it is highlighted that differences between classmates have the strongest impact on each of the four analyzed sources in generating/obtaining the four main types of rewards: praise in front of classmates, parents, physical contact, and appreciative smiles.

For analytical example: differences between students represent the main effect that generates praise in front of classmates. Additionally, the risk of self-overestimation/self-overevaluation is generated both through praise in front of classmates, parents.

Giving up at the first failure represents the effect with the least impact (compared to other analyzed situations) on receiving appreciative smiles:

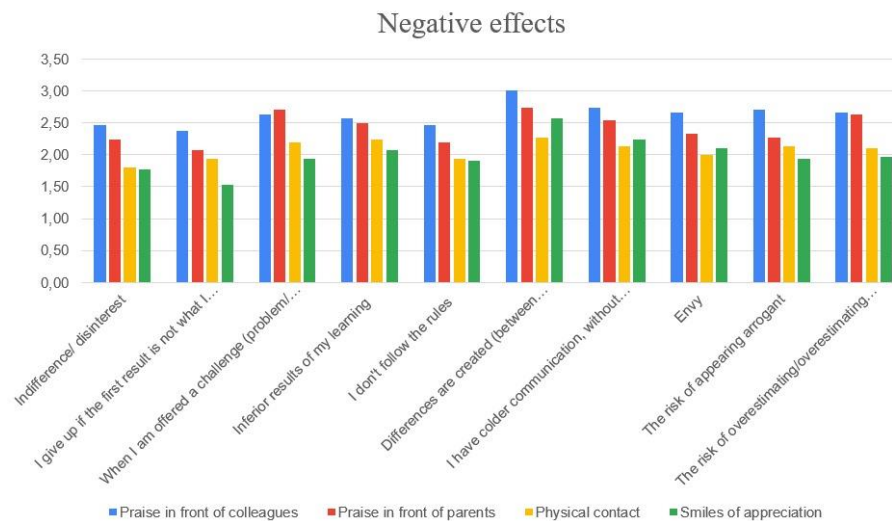


Figure 10. Responses regarding the negative effects of social rewards. Arithmetic mean  
**Discussions**

According to the study written by Hermita N. and Zariul A., (2019), there is a connection between motivation for learning and rewards, with a questionnaire applied to 115 students, the results showing that there is a close link between the two variables, which motivates students to improve their academic performance. The teacher, as a good example, constantly encourages and motivates students, with rewards being the most stimulating factor for them. Offering rewards is important for students, making them more motivated, and being a positive cause for this process.

There are many factors that influence academic success, but most students change their behaviour due to rewards, which also increase the connection in the teacher-student and teacher-family relationships. According to a study by Rachael E. Caffyn (1987) most parents support that rewards are very effective and help students in increasing their self-esteem.

The image of using rewards is quite clear, with students being more motivated during the learning process, becoming more efficient. Rewards have become a permanent feature in primary school classrooms, the situations and effects following their application being clearly understood. Each teacher knows how to apply their teaching methods in relation to the rewards used, so that each student feels appreciated and involved (Ilegbusi, M.I., 2013).

Thus, although there are not many specialized studies on this topic, some hypotheses are confirmed by them, such as hypotheses one and three regarding the positive impact on learning behaviours and the frequency of using rewards in education.

### **Conclusions**

Rewards greatly help not only in nurturing a positive self-image of the child but also in motivating their learning efforts. Providing reactions from teachers such as praise in front of classmates and parents, appreciative smiles, receiving medals/certificates motivates students to actively participate during classes, behave appropriately, and develop positive relationships with their classmates.



Their involvement in fun and relaxing activities outside of school, being given responsibilities in certain aspects/elements of class life, and physical contact (hugs, pats, etc.) increase the value of each reward, representing a factor for improving the teacher-student relationship.

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