

Challenges and Institutional Support in Implementing Positive Reinforcement in Malaysian Primary Schools: Teachers' Perspectives and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Although positive reinforcement is widely endorsed as an effective classroom management strategy, its consistent implementation in real classrooms is often constrained by practical and institutional conditions. This study explored the challenges Malaysian primary school teachers face when using positive reinforcement and the forms of institutional support they consider necessary for its effective implementation, with a view to proposing recommendations for practice. A qualitative, phenomenological design was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five primary school teachers from five states in Peninsular Malaysia, selected through purposive sampling; the data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed four interrelated challenges: large class sizes that prevent individualised attention, time constraints that hinder immediate and consistent reinforcement, heavy workloads that reduce teachers' capacity to focus on students, and student over-dependence on tangible rewards that risks undermining intrinsic motivation. Teachers further emphasised that institutional support is essential, calling for structured professional training and workshops, adequate resources and materials, reduced workloads, smaller class sizes, and stronger administrative backing. These findings indicate that the gap between reinforcement theory and classroom practice is largely systemic rather than attitudinal: teachers are willing to apply positive reinforcement, but contextual and institutional constraints limit its use. The study recommends that schools and policymakers institute regular professional development on reinforcement strategies, provide practical reinforcement materials, review teacher workloads and class sizes, and develop school-level guidelines that balance extrinsic rewards with the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. The paper contributes contextual, classroom-grounded evidence to the literature on behavioural classroom management and offers actionable guidance for improving the conditions under which positive reinforcement is implemented in Malaysian primary education.

Keywords: Positive reinforcement, implementation challenges, institutional support, teacher workload, Malaysian primary schools

INTRODUCTION

Positive reinforcement, rooted in B. F. Skinner's operant conditioning, encourages desirable behaviour by providing rewards, praise, and recognition when students behave appropriately (Khanum et al., 2025; Leeder, 2022). In Malaysia, education policy has shifted towards student-centred learning and positive behavioural approaches rather than strict punishment (Lim Kok Seng, 2024; Mat & Jamaludin, 2024), and a growing body of evidence documents the benefits of reinforcement for behaviour, motivation, and engagement (Raof & Aziz, 2025; Zahid & Cheema, 2023; Abdulrazak et al., 2025).

However, the reality of the degree to which positive reinforcement is actually applied within Malaysian primary schools remains largely unknown. Teachers face practical difficulties when applying reinforcement: heavy workloads and large class sizes make it difficult to provide individual attention to each student

(Lagawid, 2024; Coleman, 2018), and some teachers continue to rely on traditional discipline methods because these are easier to manage within busy classroom schedules. Survey evidence suggests the problem is widespread: 74% of teachers report being unable to implement positive reinforcement properly on a regular basis, and 90% report insufficient training programmes (Mondol et al., 2026; Horn et al., 2024). Without understanding teachers' views, it is difficult to recognise the real-life obstacles they face, leaving a gap between classroom practice and educational theory.

This study therefore addresses two objectives derived from a broader investigation of teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement in Malaysian primary schools: (1) to explore the challenges faced by teachers when using positive reinforcement in primary schools, and (2) to propose recommendations for improving the use of positive reinforcement in Malaysian primary schools based on teachers' perceptions. The corresponding research questions are: What challenges do teachers face when using positive reinforcement in primary schools? and What recommendations can be proposed to improve its use based on teachers' perceptions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Reinforcement and Its Implementation Requirements

Operant conditioning proposes that behaviour is shaped by its consequences, and that reinforcement must be timely and consistent to strengthen the relationship between behaviour and consequence (Leeder, 2022; Bonghawan & Macalisang, 2024). Inconsistent reinforcement can confuse students and weaken behavioural strategies, which places real demands on teachers' time and attention. Reinforcement schedules also matter: continuous reinforcement suits the initial stages of learning, whereas intermittent reinforcement sustains behaviour in the long run (Pan et al., 2024). Meeting these requirements in crowded, fast-paced primary classrooms is a central practical challenge.

Challenges in Using Positive Reinforcement in Primary Schools

The literature identifies several recurring constraints. Time is one of the most widespread: primary teachers juggle lesson delivery, classroom management, assessment, and administration, making it difficult to deliver continuous and immediate reinforcement to every student (Johler et al., 2022). Large class sizes, common in Malaysia, prevent personalised reinforcement and individual attention, causing some students to feel neglected and undermining the consistency crucial to strengthening desired behaviours (Taylor et al., 2025; Zahid & Cheema, 2023; Coleman, 2018).

Over-reliance on tangible rewards is a further concern, as students may come to expect a reward for every positive behaviour, reducing intrinsic motivation (Fernando et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2023). The absence of effective training can lead to haphazard implementation, such as vague praise that does not specify which behaviour is being reinforced (Bowen & Watson, 2025; Hasanah et al., 2024). Individual differences among students, the difficulty of sustaining reinforcement practices across a school year, and the risk of inadvertently reinforcing the wrong behaviour add further complexity (Ghafar, 2023; Mamaile & Omodan, 2023; Namdar & Altun, 2025).

Institutional and Contextual Support

Teacher workload in Malaysia has been reported as high due to administrative assignments and curriculum requirements, contributing to burnout and reducing teachers' capacity to provide frequent, prompt feedback (Ani et al., 2025; Md Shah et al., 2024; Impuesto, 2024). Resource constraints are cited as a significant obstruction to adopting novel teaching techniques (Sheikh & Nor, 2023), and large student numbers undermine the quality of individualised approaches such as positive reinforcement (Hussin et al., 2025). Without professional development, teachers may apply classroom management strategies ineffectively or inconsistently (Ahmar & Azzajjad, 2025; Robinson et al., 2023; Obee et al., 2023), whereas structured institutional support has been shown to considerably enhance reinforcement strategies (Stasolla et al., 2025).

Professional training also improves teachers' knowledge, skills, motivation, and self-efficacy (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2022). In Malaysian classrooms specifically, observational research has found praise to be infrequent, and its authors prescribed vigorous in-service instruction to entrench praise and reinforcement methods in a more organised way (Awang et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used because the study aimed to understand teachers' subjective experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of positive reinforcement rather than to quantify variables (Lim, 2025). Phenomenology is appropriate for investigating lived experience: teachers' day-to-day interactions with students, their decision-making, and their interpretations of reinforcement strategies are multifaceted and situational and cannot be adequately captured with structured quantitative instruments (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024).

Participants and Sampling

Five primary school teachers currently working in government schools in Peninsular Malaysia participated, drawn from Selangor, Johor, Perak, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur, with between 5 and 15 years of teaching experience. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich participants (Obilor, 2023; Tajik et al., 2025). Inclusion criteria required that participants were currently teaching in Malaysian primary schools, had at least one year of teaching experience, and had practised classroom management techniques such as positive reinforcement. The small sample is consistent with the depth-oriented logic of qualitative research and the goal of data saturation (Ahmed, 2025).

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 to 45 minutes, guided by an interview protocol developed from the research objectives and literature (Belina, 2023; Karatsareas, 2022). Questions addressed, among other matters, the problems teachers experience when using positive reinforcement and what should be done to improve or assist its application in schools. Formal permission was secured, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were assured. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the guide was checked and tested beforehand for clarity (Adamova, 2025).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns in the data (Naeem et al., 2023). The process involved familiarisation with the transcripts, systematic generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, and interpretation in relation to the literature and research objectives (Robinson & Wilson, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2025; Polat, 2025).

RESULTS

Two themes address the study's objectives: the challenges teachers face when implementing positive reinforcement, and the institutional support they regard as necessary. Table 1 summarises the themes, codes, and their interpretation.

Table 1. Themes, codes, and interpretation

Theme	Codes	Interpretation
Teachers face multiple challenges in effectively implementing positive	Large class size; time constraints; heavy workload; student dependence	Practical, interrelated constraints limit consistent and

reinforcement in primary classrooms	on rewards	individualised reinforcement
Institutional support is necessary to enhance the effective implementation of positive reinforcement in schools	Need for teacher training; lack of resources; need to reduce workload; need for administrative support	Effective implementation depends on systemic, school-level enabling conditions

Theme 1: Challenges in implementing positive reinforcement

Although the teachers acknowledged the importance of positive reinforcement, they reported a number of practical problems in applying it. Large class size was the most prominent. T1 replied, “sometimes the class is big, so it is hard to give attention to all students”; T3 stated that “large class sizes are the significant issues which I faced most of the time”; and T5 said that “managing many students at the same time remains difficult for me”. With many students in a classroom, teachers cannot monitor every student's behaviour or deliver feedback equally, a finding consistent with evidence that large classes decrease reinforcement effectiveness because teachers cannot personalise reinforcement or maintain consistency (Fahad Mon et al., 2023).

Time constraints were a second significant challenge. T1 observed that reinforcement “takes time”, and T3 stressed that “time constraint is a significant issue”. Reinforcement requires prompt feedback, which is hard to sustain in lessons with strict schedules, particularly when teachers must simultaneously support teaching, administration, and classroom management (Obee et al., 2023). Heavy workload compounded these difficulties: T2 argued that “workload needs to be reduced so teachers can focus more on students”. This aligns with reports that Malaysian teachers carry high administrative and curricular workloads (Ani et al., 2025) and that many fail to give positive reinforcement frequently because of workload pressure (Md Shah et al., 2024).

Finally, student dependence on rewards emerged as a challenge that can interfere with intrinsic motivation. T2 noted that “some students expect rewards every time”, and T4 found that “students depend too much on rewards which I found is a major issue”. Excessive use of tangible rewards risks making students reliant on external incentives rather than self-motivated (Kim et al., 2023; Fernando et al., 2025). These challenges are interrelated: large classes and workloads generate time limitations that further prevent teachers from adopting reinforcement regularly (Lagawid, 2024). National-level evidence corroborates the pattern, with 74% of teachers reportedly unable to use positive reinforcement regularly and 90% citing inadequate training (Horn et al., 2024).

Theme 2: The Necessity of Institutional Support

All participants stressed that institutional support is important in enabling successful use of reinforcement strategies. Professional training and workshops were the most commonly stated need: T1 pointed out that “teachers should be trained more and schools should support us with proper materials”, T3 called for “more workshops and training for teachers”, and T5 agreed that to “provide training will be appropriate”. These responses indicate that teachers feel inadequately prepared to employ reinforcement tactics in a structured, effective manner, in line with findings that without relevant training teachers may not exercise reinforcement techniques consistently (Ahmar & Azzajjad, 2025; Robinson et al., 2023).

Lack of resources was a further concern. T4 stated that “schools should provide more resources and support”, underscoring the importance of materials such as reward systems, charts, and tools for implementing reinforcement, consistent with research citing resource constraints as a significant obstruction to novel teaching techniques (Sheikh & Nor, 2023). Teachers also connected workload and class-size pressures directly to institutional policy: T2 repeated that “workload needs to be reduced so teachers can focus more on students”, and T5 and T3 identified managing many students and large class sizes as persistent difficulties, echoing evidence that large student numbers undermine individualised teaching approaches in Malaysian primary schools (Hussin et al., 2025) and that overworked teachers cannot offer the prompt, frequent feedback essential to reinforcement (Impuesto, 2024). Taken together, the responses show that while teachers are eager to implement positive reinforcement, institutional constraints limit its usage,

and structured institutional support could considerably enhance reinforcement practice (Stasolla et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the barriers to positive reinforcement in Malaysian primary classrooms are chiefly systemic rather than attitudinal. Teachers valued reinforcement but were constrained by large classes, limited time, heavy workloads, and students' dependence on rewards, findings that converge closely with prior research identifying the same obstacles (Johler et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2025; Fernando et al., 2025). The concern over reward dependence also confirms literature warning that extravagant rewards can decrease intrinsic motivation (Kim et al., 2023), and with evidence that learners' motivation is shaped by broader existence, relatedness and growth needs (Hambali et al., 2025), suggesting that teachers need strategies for gradually shifting from tangible rewards towards verbal support and self-regulation (Azhar, 2024; Rifin et al., 2025).

The emphasis teachers placed on training, resources, workload reduction, and administrative support corresponds strongly with earlier research on professional development and institutional enablement (Bowen & Watson, 2025; Hyseni Duraku et al., 2022; Obee et al., 2023). Theoretically, the results indicate that operant conditioning's requirements of timely and consistent reinforcement (Bonghawan & Macalisang, 2024) cannot be met in practice unless contextual conditions permit; theoretical frameworks should therefore take contextual factors into account when explaining the effectiveness of reinforcement strategies.

Practically, the findings yield the following recommendations based on teachers' perceptions: (1) schools should institute regular workshops and in-service training on structured reinforcement strategies; (2) administrators should provide practical materials such as token systems, charts, and reward resources; (3) policymakers should review teacher workloads and class sizes so that teachers can deliver immediate, consistent, and individualised reinforcement; (4) school-level guidelines should promote a balance between extrinsic rewards and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation to prevent reward dependence; and (5) administrative support structures should recognise and facilitate positive, non-punitive classroom management. The study is limited by its small sample of five teachers in Peninsular Malaysia and its reliance on self-reported perceptions; the findings are therefore indicative rather than generalisable.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges Malaysian primary school teachers face when using positive reinforcement and the institutional support they consider necessary for its effective implementation. Teachers encounter four interrelated obstacles: large class sizes, time constraints, heavy workloads, and student dependence on rewards, and they clearly articulated the need for professional training, adequate resources, reduced workloads, and administrative backing.

The study contributes contextual evidence showing that the theory-practice gap in reinforcement is driven largely by institutional conditions, and it proposes concrete recommendations for schools and policymakers to create environments in which positive reinforcement can be applied consistently and effectively. Future research should employ larger and more geographically diverse samples, incorporate student perspectives, evaluate the effectiveness of teacher training programmes on reinforcement, and investigate how school leadership, policies, and resource allocation influence implementation.

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