

ASSESSING THE PRACTICALITY OF REWARD SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF THE "HAPPY AND SAD LIST"

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ABSTRAK

Penerapan *reward system* di kelas telah banyak digunakan untuk mendorong perilaku positif dan meningkatkan motivasi belajar peserta didik. Namun, kajian mengenai implikasi psikologis dan pedagogis dari pengelompokan peserta didik secara terbuka melalui pendekatan *happy and sad list* masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis penerapan *reward system* melalui pendekatan *happy and sad list* dengan mengkaji implikasinya terhadap perilaku, motivasi belajar, dan perkembangan psikologis peserta didik. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang memanfaatkan kasus autentik yang dipublikasikan dalam *The Psychologist* sebagai unit analisis. Data dianalisis melalui pembacaan berulang, pengodean tematik, dan interpretasi menggunakan triangulasi teori yang mengintegrasikan perspektif *behaviourism*, *incentive theory*, *labelling theory*, dan pendekatan humanistik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan tersebut dapat mendorong perilaku positif, meningkatkan partisipasi kelas, dan memperkuat motivasi belajar apabila diterapkan secara adil serta didukung *positive reinforcement*. Sebaliknya, penerapan yang tidak tepat berpotensi menimbulkan pelabelan negatif, menurunkan *self-efficacy*, memicu ketidaknyamanan emosional, dan mengurangi motivasi belajar. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pengelolaan perilaku yang menyeimbangkan penguatan positif, kesejahteraan psikologis, praktik pembelajaran yang adil, serta kolaborasi sekolah dan keluarga dalam membangun lingkungan belajar yang inklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Happy And Sad List, Manajemen Kelas, Motivasi Belajar, Positive Reinforcement, Reward System.*

ABSTRACT

The implementation of *reward systems* in classrooms has been widely adopted to encourage positive behavior and enhance students' learning motivation. However, studies examining the psychological and pedagogical implications of openly grouping students through the *happy and sad list* approach remain limited. This study aimed to **analyze** the implementation of a *reward system* using the *happy and sad list* approach by examining its implications for students' behavior, learning motivation, and psychological development. The study employed a qualitative case study design using an authentic case published in *The Psychologist* as the unit of analysis. Data were analyzed through repeated reading, thematic coding, and interpretive analysis using theoretical triangulation by integrating perspectives from behaviorism, incentive theory, labeling theory, and the humanistic approach. The findings indicate that this approach can promote positive behavior, increase classroom participation, and strengthen learning



motivation when implemented fairly and supported by positive reinforcement. Conversely, inappropriate implementation may lead to negative labeling, reduced self-efficacy, emotional discomfort, and diminished learning motivation. These findings underscore the importance of balancing positive reinforcement, students' psychological well-being, equitable instructional practices, and collaboration between schools and families to foster an inclusive learning environment.

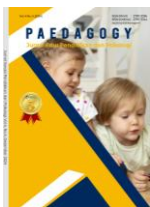
Keywords: *Happy And Sad List, Classroom Management, Learning Motivation, Positive Reinforcement, Reward System.*

INTRODUCTION

Positive student behavior is one of the fundamental prerequisites for creating a conducive learning environment. Teachers are expected not only to deliver instructional content but also to foster students' learning motivation through effective classroom management strategies that encourage active engagement. One of the most widely implemented approaches is the reward system, which provides recognition as a form of reinforcement for desirable behavior. This strategy has been recognized as an effective means of enhancing students' motivation while creating a more enjoyable learning experience (Chen, 2023; Maisarah, 2024). Ideally, classroom reward systems should encourage students to develop intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and positive social interactions. However, in practice, reward implementation often prioritizes immediate behavioral compliance rather than students' long-term psychological development, creating a gap between the intended educational purpose and its classroom application.

The implementation of positive reinforcement has been shown to contribute significantly to improving students' learning motivation by acknowledging their efforts and achievements throughout the learning process. Appropriate reinforcement can cultivate positive habits, strengthen students' self-confidence, and increase their active participation in classroom activities. Previous studies have demonstrated that positive reinforcement effectively enhances students' motivation in reading and writing activities as well as among learners from diverse educational backgrounds (Ulfa et al., 2025; Alfiani & Saniah, 2023). These findings are closely aligned with Behaviourism, which emphasizes reinforcement as a mechanism for shaping observable behavior, and Incentive Theory, which explains that external rewards may stimulate learning motivation. Nevertheless, Humanistic Theory and Labelling Theory suggest that reinforcement practices should also consider students' emotional well-being, self-concept, and social identity, particularly when rewards are implemented through visible classroom categorization.

Numerous studies conducted in Indonesia have also reported that the implementation of reward strategies positively influences students' learning motivation across different educational levels. Properly administered rewards encourage students to participate more actively in classroom activities and maintain positive learning behaviors. Furthermore, the combination of reward and punishment has been found to improve both students' motivation and academic achievement when implemented systematically and appropriately (Andriana & Rokmanah, 2023; Sarah et al., 2022; Fibrianti et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies indicate that reward systems are generally associated with positive educational outcomes. However, they predominantly evaluate measurable learning outcomes, while providing limited attention to the psychological consequences that may emerge from specific reward mechanisms used in everyday classroom practice.



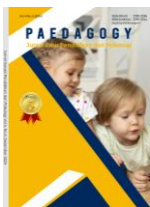
Nevertheless, the implementation of reward systems does not always produce similar outcomes across different educational contexts. Their effectiveness largely depends on the type of rewards provided, students' individual characteristics, and the way teachers integrate them into classroom management practices. Inappropriate use of rewards may even diminish students' intrinsic motivation when they become primarily oriented toward external incentives. Therefore, the effectiveness of reward systems should be examined within specific educational contexts to maximize their educational benefits (Chen, 2023; Budiarmo, 2023). This inconsistency demonstrates a more specific research gap, namely the limited understanding of how publicly visible reward practices, such as the *happy and sad list*, simultaneously influence students' motivation, classroom participation, emotional responses, and self-perception.

From the perspective of educational management, reward systems are also regarded as instruments for enhancing individuals' psychological well-being, satisfaction, and commitment to their responsibilities. This perspective suggests that rewards are not only relevant in workplace settings but also play an important role in education by fostering a culture of appreciation. Consequently, rewards for students should be designed as an integral component of instructional strategies aimed at promoting character development and strengthening learning motivation (Julianto, 2024). Accordingly, effective classroom management requires balancing behavioral reinforcement with students' psychological safety so that appreciation supports learning without creating unintended social or emotional consequences.

Technological advancements have also created new opportunities for implementing reward systems in educational settings. The application of artificial intelligence through large language model-powered agents has begun to simulate classroom interactions, thereby supporting the development of more adaptive instructional strategies, including the provision of feedback and rewards for students. Although these developments demonstrate the growing interest in innovative reinforcement strategies, the effectiveness of any reward system ultimately depends on pedagogical design rather than technological sophistication. On the other hand, the rapid growth of digital media has introduced new challenges, as excessive media use may reduce students' learning motivation and overall well-being when not accompanied by appropriate instructional management (Zhang et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2022).

Although extensive research has examined reward systems, positive reinforcement, and learning motivation, most previous studies have primarily focused on measuring their effects on students' motivation or academic achievement using quantitative approaches. Research specifically evaluating the implementation of the *happy and sad list* as a classroom reward system from psychological and pedagogical perspectives remains limited. Yet, every form of reward has the potential to produce both positive and negative consequences for students' social and emotional development when implemented inappropriately (Chen, 2023; Maisarah, 2024). Furthermore, little attention has been given to qualitative analyses that explore how this classroom practice reflects the interaction among Behaviourism, Incentive Theory, Labelling Theory, and Humanistic perspectives in explaining both its educational benefits and unintended psychological risks.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to evaluate the practicality of implementing a reward system through the *happy and sad list* approach by examining its implications for students' motivation, behavior, and psychological development. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of four complementary theoretical perspectives Behaviourism, Incentive Theory, Labelling Theory, and Humanistic Theory to interpret an authentic classroom case involving the *happy and sad list*. Rather than merely examining



whether rewards improve learning motivation, this study analyzes how the implementation of this specific reward mechanism simultaneously shapes students' behavior, emotional well-being, self-perception, and classroom interactions. The findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of classroom reward systems and to serve as a practical reference for teachers in implementing reinforcement strategies that are fair, educationally meaningful, and supportive of students' holistic development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a descriptive case study design to explore the psychological and pedagogical implications of implementing the *happy and sad list* approach as a classroom reward system. The unit of analysis was an authentic published case rather than human participants. The case analyzed was a letter published in *The Psychologist*, selected through purposive sampling because it explicitly described classroom interactions involving teachers, students, and parents in response to the implementation of the *happy and sad list* reward system. The study was conducted from January to April 2026 through document-based analysis. A qualitative approach was adopted because the study sought to understand the meanings, educational implications, and psychological consequences of the phenomenon rather than to examine causal relationships among variables. The selected case provided a rich and authentic context for investigating both the educational value and the potential risks associated with classroom reward practices.

Data were collected through systematic document analysis using a researcher-developed document review protocol designed to record information related to classroom reward practices, students' behavioral responses, psychological impacts, pedagogical consequences, and contextual factors described in the case narrative. The protocol was developed based on the objectives of the study and relevant literature on reward systems, positive reinforcement, learning motivation, and socio-emotional development, and its content was reviewed by educational experts before being used in the analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading, data reduction, open coding, category development, thematic analysis, and interpretation. The identified themes were interpreted through the perspectives of behaviourism, incentive theory, labelling theory, and the humanistic approach, while evidence from previous studies was integrated to strengthen the interpretation. The trustworthiness of the findings was established through theoretical triangulation by comparing interpretations derived from multiple psychological perspectives with relevant empirical literature. The interpreted findings were then organized thematically to explain the relationships among reward strategies, learning motivation, behavioral development, and the ethical implications of implementing the *happy and sad list* approach in classroom settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Implementation of the Happy and Sad List in Classroom Practice

The classroom case analyzed in this study describes the implementation of the *happy and sad list* as a classroom behaviour management strategy designed to encourage desirable behaviour through public recognition. In this approach, the teacher categorised students into two visible lists displayed during classroom activities. The *happy list* contained the names of students who consistently demonstrated behaviours considered appropriate in the classroom, whereas the *sad list* included students whose behaviour was perceived as inconsistent with



classroom expectations. The lists were updated according to students' behaviour observed during the learning process and became part of the classroom management routine.

Placement on either list was determined by behavioural criteria established by the teacher. Students were included in the *happy list* when they actively participated in classroom activities, followed classroom rules, completed learning tasks responsibly, cooperated with peers, and demonstrated respectful behaviour toward teachers and classmates. Conversely, students were placed on the *sad list* when they repeatedly disrupted classroom activities, ignored teacher instructions, failed to complete assigned tasks, or displayed behaviours considered inappropriate within the learning environment. The categorisation was therefore intended to provide immediate behavioural feedback based on students' classroom conduct.

Students included in the *happy list* received social rewards in the form of public recognition, verbal praise, and positive acknowledgement from the teacher, which served as reinforcement for maintaining appropriate classroom behaviour. In contrast, placement on the *sad list* functioned as a behavioural consequence rather than a material punishment. Students received corrective feedback and were expected to improve their behaviour in subsequent learning activities in order to return to the *happy list*. The documented case also illustrates that although the strategy was intended to strengthen positive behaviour, the public visibility of the categorisation generated different psychological responses among students, making it an appropriate case for analysing the educational and psychological implications of classroom reward systems.

The analysis of the *happy and sad list* case identified four major psychological perspectives that were consistently reflected in the classroom practice. These perspectives describe how the implementation of the *reward system* was associated with students' behavioural responses, learning motivation, self-perception, and classroom participation. Each perspective emerged from the case narrative and represents a distinct pattern observed during the implementation of the classroom strategy. A summary of these findings is presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Summary of Psychological Perspectives Identified from the *Happy and Sad List* Case

Psychological Perspective	Observation from the Case	Recorded Outcome
<i>Behaviourism</i>	Students received positive or negative reinforcement through placement on the <i>happy</i> or <i>sad list</i> .	Behavioural responses varied according to the reinforcement received.
<i>Incentive Theory</i>	Rewards were provided after students demonstrated expected classroom behaviour.	Student participation increased when rewards were perceived as meaningful.
<i>Labelling Theory</i>	Public identification through the <i>sad list</i> became part of classroom interaction.	Differences in students' self-perception were evident following classroom labelling.
<i>Humanistic Perspective</i>	Students responded differently depending on the opportunities provided for participation and recognition.	Individual differences in classroom engagement were observed.



As shown in *Table 1*, the case demonstrated that classroom responses could be grouped into four complementary psychological perspectives. Each perspective highlighted different observable aspects of students' behaviour during the implementation of the *reward system*. The findings indicate that classroom interactions involved behavioural, motivational, and socio-emotional dimensions simultaneously throughout the learning process. These observations constitute the primary findings obtained from the analysis of the documented classroom case.

Further examination of the case also identified several educational practices that accompanied the implementation of the *happy and sad list*. These practices were associated with classroom observation, teacher support, school engagement, communication with parents, and strategies designed to strengthen students' confidence during learning activities. Rather than functioning as isolated actions, these practices appeared as complementary elements within the documented classroom management process. A summary of these findings is presented in *Table 2*.

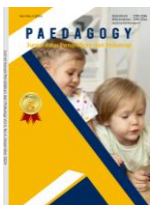
Table 2. Educational Practices Identified during the Implementation of the *Happy and Sad List*

Educational Practice	Observation from the Case	Recorded Classroom Condition
<i>ABC Assessment</i>	Student behaviour was documented through antecedents, behaviours, and consequences.	Behavioural patterns could be systematically identified.
<i>Attachment to School</i>	Teacher–student interaction focused on strengthening students' engagement with school.	Classroom participation remained connected to learning activities.
Parent Collaboration	Communication between teachers and parents became part of behaviour management.	Family involvement was identified as part of the educational process.
<i>Attribution and Achievement Goal Theory</i>	Students received encouragement regarding their learning abilities and goals.	Positive learning expectations were documented during classroom interactions.

As presented in *Table 2*, the findings show that the implementation of the *reward system* was accompanied by several educational practices extending beyond the provision of rewards alone. The identified practices involved behavioural observation, communication, collaborative support, and student encouragement within the classroom context. Each practice represented a documented component of the analysed case and contributed to the overall description of classroom implementation. Collectively, these findings provide a structured overview of the educational elements identified during the analysis without extending into theoretical interpretation, which is addressed in the subsequent *Discussion* section.

Discussion

The findings indicate that implementing a reward system through the *happy and sad list* approach is associated with changes in students' behaviour during the learning process. This finding is consistent with the behaviourist perspective, which argues that behaviour is shaped



by the consequences that follow an individual's actions, whether in the form of positive reinforcement or negative consequences. Within the context of this study, students who received recognition for demonstrating positive behaviour tended to maintain those behaviours because they perceived a clear relationship between their actions and the consequences they received. However, the present findings also demonstrate that the *happy and sad list* differs from conventional reward systems because reinforcement is delivered through public classroom categorisation, making behavioural consequences visible not only to individual students but also to their peers. Consequently, behavioural change is influenced not only by reinforcement itself but also by students' awareness of their social position within the classroom. These findings are consistent with those reported by Fahmi et al. (2024) and Deosari and Appulembang (2022), who found that the use of reward and positive reinforcement effectively enhanced students' learning enthusiasm, classroom engagement, and the consistency of positive behaviour throughout the learning process.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of a reward system is influenced not only by the provision of rewards but also by the quality of its implementation. The findings suggest that repeatedly providing the same type of reward without considering students' individual needs may gradually reduce its reinforcing value. This indicates that motivation derived from external incentives requires variation to remain meaningful for learners with different characteristics. These findings are consistent with Zahid and Cheema (2023), who demonstrated that both positive and negative reinforcement affect learning motivation differently depending on how they are implemented. Likewise, Ross (2022) reported that the effectiveness of classroom reward systems is closely associated with students' perceptions of the rewards they receive. Conversely, the present findings also indicate that the *happy and sad list* may generate unintended psychological consequences when students perceive the public categorisation as a form of comparison rather than constructive feedback. This observation suggests that reward systems possess inherent limitations, particularly when external recognition becomes more salient than students' internal learning goals.

The analysis further revealed that the implementation of the *happy and sad list* was associated with the development of students' social identity through the process of labelling. Publicly placing students' names on different lists may influence both how students perceive themselves and how they are perceived by their classmates. This observation is consistent with labelling theory, which proposes that social labels influence individuals' behaviour through the internalisation of assigned identities. Similar findings were reported by Faried and Yusuf (2025), who explained that labelling functions as a mechanism of social control capable of shaping individual behaviour through the identities assigned by the surrounding social environment. Unlike classroom reward systems that provide private feedback, the *happy and sad list* introduces a visible social dimension that may reinforce desirable behaviour while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of social comparison and identity formation among students. Therefore, the educational impact of this approach extends beyond behavioural management to encompass students' interpersonal relationships within the classroom community.

Another important implication of the findings concerns the development of students' self-efficacy. Students who repeatedly experienced positive reinforcement tended to demonstrate greater confidence in their ability to accomplish academic tasks, whereas repeated negative experiences were associated with increased self-doubt. These findings suggest that classroom reward systems influence not only observable behaviour but also students'





psychological development. This interpretation is supported by Wiguna et al. (2022), who emphasised that self-efficacy plays a critical role in encouraging students to face academic challenges and persist when encountering learning difficulties. Viewed collectively, Behaviourism explains how reinforcement shapes observable behaviour, Labelling Theory explains how public categorisation influences students' social identity, while self-efficacy explains how repeated classroom experiences affect learners' academic confidence. These complementary perspectives indicate that the educational consequences of the *happy and sad list* cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical lens.

Beyond individual psychological outcomes, the implementation of the reward system was also associated with the development of a more positive classroom culture when applied consistently. Appropriately administered rewards encouraged students to demonstrate disciplined behaviour, mutual respect, and active participation during learning activities. These findings indicate that effective classroom management constitutes an essential component of successful reward implementation. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Wati et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of classroom management in establishing a positive learning environment, and Romadoni et al. (2025), who reported that consistent disciplinary practices contributed to strengthening students' learning enthusiasm. These studies collectively suggest that reward systems become more effective when integrated with classroom management strategies that promote fairness, consistency, and supportive teacher-student interactions rather than relying solely on external reinforcement.

The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of a classroom reward system depends substantially on teachers' role modelling throughout the instructional process. Rewards become more meaningful when accompanied by teachers' consistent application of classroom rules, constructive feedback, and fair treatment of all students. Under these conditions, rewards are perceived not merely as material incentives but also as recognition of students' learning efforts and progress. These findings reinforce those of Santi et al. (2023), who concluded that teachers' exemplary behaviour, combined with the appropriate implementation of reward and punishment, contributes positively to enhancing students' learning motivation. Within the *happy and sad list* approach, teachers therefore function not only as providers of reinforcement but also as facilitators who determine whether classroom categorisation is experienced as constructive encouragement or as negative judgement.

From a humanistic perspective, the findings indicate that students require emotional support in addition to external rewards. Rewards appear to be more beneficial when implemented alongside respect for students' individual needs, abilities, and personal characteristics. Such an approach enables students to develop without experiencing excessive comparison with their peers. These findings are consistent with Agustin et al. (2026), who demonstrated that a humanistic approach promotes a more inclusive learning environment through educational leadership focused on developing students' individual potential. In addition to school-related factors, the findings indicate that successful implementation of the reward system is also influenced by parental involvement in supporting students' behavioural development. Effective communication between teachers and families enables behavioural guidance to continue consistently across both school and home environments. This collaborative partnership provides students with continuous reinforcement, making positive behaviour more likely to be maintained over time. These findings support those reported by Yusu and Sulaiman (2024), who emphasised that collaboration between teachers and parents plays a significant role in fostering students' character development and promoting positive



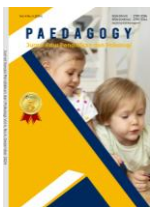
behaviour. Integrating the humanistic perspective with family involvement demonstrates that reinforcement should be embedded within a supportive educational ecosystem in which teachers and parents jointly promote students' emotional well-being alongside behavioural development.

Overall, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that the educational implications of the *happy and sad list* cannot be explained solely by the effectiveness of rewards in modifying behaviour. Instead, the findings reveal that publicly visible classroom categorisation simultaneously activates behavioural reinforcement, social labelling, changes in self-efficacy, and students' emotional responses. By integrating Behaviourism, Labelling Theory, self-efficacy, and the Humanistic perspective into a single analytical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of why identical reward practices may produce different outcomes among students. This integrated perspective constitutes the primary novelty of the present study and contributes to the literature by shifting attention from the effectiveness of rewards alone toward the ethical, psychological, and pedagogical considerations that should guide classroom behaviour management. Furthermore, the findings provide practical guidance for teachers to implement reward systems that are fair, psychologically supportive, and responsive to students' diverse developmental needs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of a reward system through the *happy and sad list* approach influences students' behavioural development, learning motivation, and classroom engagement. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of the strategy depends not merely on the provision of rewards but also on the way appreciation is delivered, the fairness of its implementation, and the consideration given to students' psychological and social characteristics. While positive reinforcement encourages desirable classroom behaviour, public recognition and behavioural categorisation should be applied carefully to avoid unintended effects on students' self-confidence and emotional well-being. These findings demonstrate that classroom behaviour management requires a balanced approach that integrates behavioural reinforcement with sensitivity to students' individual needs. More importantly, the findings address the research gap identified in previous studies, which have predominantly examined reward systems in terms of their effects on learning motivation or academic achievement while paying limited attention to the psychological and pedagogical implications of publicly visible classroom reward practices such as the *happy and sad list*.

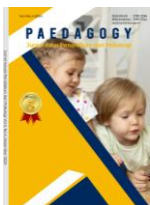
The present study contributes to educational practice by providing a comprehensive analysis of the *happy and sad list* strategy from multiple educational and psychological perspectives, thereby extending current understanding of classroom reward systems. The primary novelty of this study lies in its integration of Behaviourism, Incentive Theory, Labelling Theory, and the Humanistic perspective within a single analytical framework to explain how one classroom reward strategy can simultaneously shape students' behaviour, motivation, self-perception, and emotional well-being. This integrated perspective expands the existing literature by demonstrating that the effectiveness of classroom reward systems should be evaluated not only from behavioural outcomes but also from their broader psychological and ethical consequences. The findings suggest that teachers should implement reinforcement strategies in ways that promote positive behaviour while maintaining students' dignity, emotional security, and equal learning opportunities. In addition, strengthening collaboration among teachers, parents, and schools is essential to ensure that positive behavioural support is



sustained across different learning environments. Future research is recommended to investigate the long-term effects of various classroom reward systems across different educational levels and cultural contexts using broader research designs and empirical data.

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