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Reward and Punishment Strategies in Character Building of Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

This study explores how Islamic Education teachers adapt reward and punishment strategies to nurture morality among primary special needs students. Using a qualitative case study involving seven experienced teachers, data were collected over 12 months through interviews, observations, and documents, and were analysed thematically. Four themes emerged: reward types, reward strategies, punishment types, and punishment principles. Teachers prioritised personalised verbal and non-verbal rewards that enhanced motivation and moral understanding, while rejecting harmful punishments in favour of reflective and empathetic methods. Although limited to PPKI primary settings, the study reinforces the value-based, ethical application of behaviour management in Islamic moral education.

Keywords: Rewards, Punishments, Character, Special Educational Needs Students

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1.0 Introduction

Strategically applied rewards enhance motivation, reinforce positive behaviors, and support student development. Ghafar (2023) found that praise and incentives help students focus on desired behaviors and foster responsibility, while Nuraisah et al. (2023) reported that rewards in discipline programs improve compliance and promote active learning. In inclusive education for students with special needs (MBPK), positive reinforcement is vital for engagement, self-efficacy, and productive behavioral change.

Conversely, punitive measures may provoke frustration, reduce motivation, and disrupt emotional well-being. Bruck (2013) notes that students with learning difficulties often have limited emotional awareness, are less responsive to social cues and may exhibit inappropriate behaviors. Such challenges intensify when punishment is applied without considering individual differences and the need for emotional support.

The concept of reward and punishment is articulated through complementary Islamic and Western theoretical frameworks. In Western theory, Skinner's (1953) Operant Conditioning posits that reinforcement strengthens desired behaviours, while punishment

reduces undesired responses. From an Islamic perspective, Al-Ghazali's principle of *targhib wa tarhib* emphasises balanced rewards and punishments to nurture the soul rather than merely control behaviour. Integrating these perspectives provides a holistic foundation for discipline grounded in *rahmah*, justice, and moral responsibility, including for students with special educational needs (MBPK).

In the Malaysian context, moral education remains essential for students with special needs due to their exposure to social and behavioural challenges (Suppiah, 2012). Students with learning disabilities often exhibit aggressive behaviour, limited comprehension, and attention difficulties, which increase the complexity of classroom management. Accordingly, special education teachers require specialised skills, including appropriate reward and punishment strategies, to ethically and effectively shape students' moral behaviour and manage their conduct.

From one perspective, safeguarding student with special needs is fundamental to ensuring that reward and punishment strategies are implemented ethically in moral education. The Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the guidelines of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2022) emphasize that students with disabilities have the right to safe, non-discriminatory education that respects their dignity. Consistent with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), any form of physical or humiliating punishment contravenes human rights and the principles of inclusive education (United Nations, 2006). Consequently, in shaping the moral development of students with special needs, teachers must prioritize disciplinary approaches that protect their safety, dignity, and emotional well-being.

Previous studies highlight the need for balanced and cautious application of rewards and punishments to support student learning (Rasyid et al., 2025; Palungan et al., 2025; Tanjung et al., 2023) but primarily focus on mainstream students. The most relevant study by Zalina et al. (2016) examined reinforcement strategies, such as praise and token systems, in addressing negative behaviours among students with learning difficulties, yet was limited to reinforcement as a single moral education strategy.

In this context, the present study aims to explore the reward and punishment strategies employed by Islamic education teachers in fostering moral development among students with special educational needs. The research question guiding this study is: How do Islamic education teachers adapt reward and punishment strategies to instill moral values in MBPK students?

2.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The purpose was to explore in depth the strategies used by teachers in applying reward and punishment to foster moral development within the context of special education teaching. The primary data collection method was classroom observation during special education teaching sessions. Observations were conducted repeatedly throughout the study period, with the researcher stationed in Special Education Integrated Program (PPKI) classrooms in the selected primary schools as a non-participant observer. Field notes were recorded, capturing student behavior, social interactions, body language, and responses to teacher instructions and guidance, without disrupting the teaching process. Observations were also made on the classroom environment, the use of teaching aids, and teacher approaches in providing feedback or encouragement to the students with special needs.

Semi-structured interviews complemented the observational data, with face-to-face sessions lasting 40 minutes to two hours and audio-recorded for analysis. Document analysis of lesson plans, teaching aids, and assessment records was conducted alongside classroom observations. Integrating these three methods provided comprehensive insights into teachers' reward and punishment strategies for fostering moral development among special needs students. This triangulation strengthened the findings and offered a rich, authentic picture of moral value application in PPKI classrooms.

Ethical approval was obtained from the UiTM Ethics Committee, and official permissions were granted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, State Education Departments, District Education Offices, and the participating schools. Participants and school identities were anonymized using codes. Data was collected over a 12-month period, focusing on teachers' experiences, values, beliefs, and practices in teaching and moral development, enabling a nuanced understanding of the interplay of multiple factors within real PPKI classroom environments.

3.0 Study Sample

The participants consisted of Islamic Education Teachers (GPI) teaching the Special Education Program (PPKI) in primary schools. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in educating students with special needs and their role in moral development. The study involved seven GPIs from seven national schools in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, and Johor. In line with Merriam's (2009) recommendations, the participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- a) GPIs teaching the PPKI program,
- b) possessing a minimum of five years of teaching experience, and
- c) demonstrating teaching practices characterized by empathy, patience, and flexibility.

Initially, ten participants agreed to take part in the study; however, only seven completed the whole data collection process. The participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, i.e., when no new themes emerged from the interviews and the information became repetitive (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Data collection was conducted over a 12-month period, encompassing observation sessions, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to meet the research objectives.

Table 1. Demographics of Special Education Islamic Education Teachers

Participant	University Specialization	Education Level	Teaching Experience
1	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 10 years
2	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 10 years
3	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 10 years
4	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 10 years
5	Master's degree	Master's degree	> 15 years
6	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 5 years
7	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	> 5 years

This study obtained ethical approval from the Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education (BPPDP KPM, KPM.600-3/2/3-eras (21576)), as well as the relevant State Education Departments, schools, and participating teachers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants following clear explanations of the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality, and ethical considerations.

4.0 Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. Categories and themes were developed using thematic analysis through a constant comparative technique, examining patterns in the participants' responses across different times and locations to identify similarities and differences in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An open coding process was employed to assign meaningful codes to the participants' responses, which were then compared to a thematic matrix derived from the literature to reinforce their significance. These codes were subsequently organized under specific categories and themes, while comparisons were made between the findings and the literature to help the researchers identify gaps that had not been explored in initial observations and interviews.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the researchers conducted member checks with participants to confirm transcripts and interpretations of the data. The final strategy involved peer review with other researchers to ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

5.0 Findings and Discussion

Overall, four main themes were identified in the use of rewards and punishments for character building among students with special needs (MBPK):

5.1 Types of rewards

5.2 Reward implementation strategies

5.3 Types of punishments

5.4 Principles of punishment implementation

5.1 Types of Rewards

Rewards refer to forms of recognition provided to the MBPK as reinforcement for positive behaviors aligned with Islamic moral values, such as politeness, helping peers, respecting teachers, and punctuality. Such positive reinforcement motivates the MBPK and fosters self-confidence, as well as awareness and appreciation of the good behaviors they exhibit.

Verbal Rewards

Verbal rewards refer to praise, encouraging words, and oral motivation provided directly by the teachers to the students. Teachers frequently use them as social reinforcement that is easily understood by the MBPK. For instance, during azan instruction, teachers consistently offered praise to reinforce positive student behaviors: "Good job Ahmad, your azan sounds beautiful". The student blushed but continued the azan with greater confidence and enthusiasm (U1/P01:42). These findings indicate that verbal rewards are not merely words, but also serve to create a positive, inclusive learning environment that encourages the repetition of desirable behaviors.

Non-Verbal Rewards

Non-verbal rewards include facial expressions, gestures, material incentives, social appointments, and activity-based rewards. Despite the variety of forms, all are categorized as non-verbal because they do not involve direct use of words.

a. Facial Expressions and Gestures

Non-verbal rewards such as smiles, nods, and thumbs-up serve as positive reinforcement that are easily understood by the MBPK. According to Ustaz Fakhar, a smile functions as a signal of acceptance: "Sometimes we don't need to say anything. Just smile when they do something good, and they already know the teacher appreciates it" (U2/TB3:15). In Ustaz Saad's teaching, smiles and nods were given to students attempting to answer questions, which increased their confidence and encouraged more frequent participation (U3/P01:26).

b. Material Rewards

Material rewards such as stickers, certificates, and small gifts were used to reinforce positive behaviors in the MBPK. Ustazah Syira gave star stickers to students demonstrating respect and responsibility (U4/P03:06). Teachers view this as a motivational strategy:

"These students cannot be separated from tangible rewards... it can motivate them, and it is one way I use to observe whether they do the right thing" (U1/TB4:39). However, Ustaz Fakhar emphasized balance: "Don't let them behave well solely for the sake of a reward. Therefore, I intersperse it with praise and verbal motivation" (U2/TB3:78). Overall, material rewards are effective in character building, but there must be a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to ensure that students internalize moral values.

c. Social Rewards

Social rewards play a crucial role in promoting moral development through recognition of social responsibility. During observation, Ustaz Saad appointed an MBPK student as a leader: "Aiman, today I would like to appoint you as the leader to guide your friends to the wudhuk area," to which Aiman confidently replied, "Alright, ustaz" (U3/P01:10). This demonstrates that social recognition enhances self-confidence and leadership skills. Participants agreed that additional responsibilities foster discipline and trustworthiness, but must match the student's capability, as Ustaz Musa noted: "We also need to consider the students' abilities. Some students, if given a small task first, can only then handle a larger responsibility." (U5/TB3:76). Social rewards, therefore, function not only as recognition, but also as a stepwise learning process for MBPK to manage responsibilities effectively.

5.2 Reward Implementation Strategies

Consistent Rewarding

Consistent and immediate rewarding is an effective strategy for reinforcing positive behaviours among MBPK. As noted by Ustazah Yani, rewards should be given promptly and continuously: "When students do something good, I give the reward right away. We cannot wait long or do it only occasionally..." (U7/TB3:45). In addition, rewards need not be material; verbal affirmation and positive gestures also function as meaningful reinforcement. Ustaz Saad explained, "Sometimes just smiling and praising is enough... they smile and repeat the action" (U3/TB4:23). The findings suggest that consistent rewarding strengthens behavioural repetition, enhances self-confidence, and supports the internalisation of moral values among MBPK through sustained reinforcement.

Linking Rewards to Moral Values

The participants highlighted that rewards should be directly linked to the moral values being cultivated so that students understand the rationale behind each recognition. Classroom observations showed that teachers employ reflective strategies after giving rewards. MBPK students who receive rewards are encouraged to share their feelings and awareness of the benefits of their good actions for themselves and others. For example, after giving a star sticker to a student who helped a peer, the teacher prompted the student to reflect on the virtuous value and its connection to Islamic teachings (U7/P03:8).

Reward Selection Based on Student Needs

Reward selection for the MBPK is tailored to individual cognitive levels, emotional needs, and learning styles. Ustazah Syira adapted rewards for Aina (mild autism) with smiley stickers and break time in the calm corner, while Haziq (dyslexia) received public praise and the opportunity to be a 'teacher's assistant' (U4/P02:27). Ustaz Musa emphasized, "I have an autistic student who dislikes being touched or praised directly, but he enjoys longer break times... I give him additional break time as a reward" (U5/TB2:71). For students with ADHD, physical activities proved more effective: "If they can sit still in class for 10 minutes, they can play a movement game for two minutes" (U2/TB2:14). Overall, tailoring rewards to individual needs not only enhances short-term motivation, but also serves as a tool for character building grounded in an understanding of the MBPK's unique traits.

5.3 Types of Punishments

Verbal Reprimands

Reprimands and advisory guidance constitute the primary approach used by teachers to shape the character of the MBPK, as they are better suited to students' emotional needs and cognitive levels. As Ustaz Musa stated, "Whenever it comes to special education, we automatically have to be careful when giving punishment because they cannot handle stress... otherwise a tantrum could occur, and that would lead to another issue" (U5/TB4:64). Reprimands are delivered gently and constructively to help students reflect on their mistakes, as exemplified by Ustazah Syira, who used reflective questioning to raise awareness of proper conduct (U4/P02:15). This approach proved effective when students began to demonstrate self-awareness of their errors and voluntarily corrected their behavior, indicating that positively delivered reprimands can serve as an effective tool for moral development rather than merely a form of punishment.

Loss of Privileges

Teachers use the loss of privileges, such as reduced playtime, to help MBPK understand the link between actions and consequences. This method is applied clearly and respectfully, as noted by Ustazah Lili: "These students don't understand subtle hints... so you must be direct and give the punishment immediately" (U6/TB4:60). Observations also showed rules stating that fighting or incomplete tasks result in lost playtime (U7/P03:21). This approach positions punishment as a learning tool that cultivates awareness, responsibility, and self-correction among MBPK.

Consequence-Based Punishment

Teachers employ consequence-based punishment to help the MBPK understand the outcomes of their actions. For example, Ustazah Lili allowed a student to face difficulty for not arranging chairs before gently intervening: "It would be easier if you put the chairs aside; it

helps you and your friends pass through" (U6/P02:33). This approach emphasizes self-awareness and responsibility, transforming the function of punishment from mere disciplinary control to moral learning that fosters self-reflection among the MBPK.

5.4 Principles of Punishment Implementation

Rejecting Physical Punishment

Teachers rejected physical punishment for MBPK, emphasizing guidance grounded in care and positive communication. Ustazah Lili explained, "I saw the student leave just like that; if it were up to me, I would be angry, but children like this cannot be treated too harshly" (U6/TB5:17). Instead of harsh measures, calm and constructive reprimands help students understand consequences. Overall, teachers prioritised empathy, understanding, and care over coercion in maintaining discipline. The findings indicate that the GPI completely reject physical coercion and uphold discipline through empathy, understanding, and care.

Rejecting Emotionally Harmful Punishment

Participants rejected punishments that could harm the emotional well-being of the MBPK, such as shouting, mocking, or intimidating students, emphasizing reprimands grounded in empathy and care to preserve dignity and emotional welfare. For example, the teachers issued gentle reminders when the students failed to complete tasks: "Did you not understand earlier? Tell ustaz what you didn't understand" (U1/P02:51), and avoided threats: "It's okay if you can't sit still, but later during co-curricular time you'll get tired..." (U3/P02:29), and asked softly: "Are you okay today? Do you want to sit with ustazah for a while?" (U6/P03:18). This approach highlights empathetic guidance and respect for the students' feelings.

Balancing Firmness and Empathy

Balancing firmness and empathy underpins MBPK discipline. Teachers set clear boundaries while remaining sensitive to students' emotional needs. As Ustaz Kifli noted, he never punishes without explanation and checks students' understanding (U1/TB3:27). Ustazah Syira corrected gently yet firmly "It's time to study... sit here first, and after finishing, I'll accompany you for a walk outside the classroom, okay?" (U4/P03:18). This blend of clarity, consistency, and empathy strengthens discipline while supporting both character development and emotional well-being.

This study demonstrates that the reward and punishment strategies employed by special education teachers in educating students with special needs function to regulate behavior based on behaviorist principles, while also serving as a medium for internalizing Islamic moral values. Whereas previous studies primarily emphasized verbal and material rewards (Norddin & Wan Muda, 2025; Florian, 2021), the present findings highlight non-verbal rewards as a form of significant social reinforcement due to their concrete, immediate, and easily comprehensible nature for students with linguistic and cognitive limitations. Furthermore, the punishment approach implemented by the teachers is more reflective and prudent, aligning with value-based disciplinary principles as recommended by Farmer (2021), providing students with the opportunity to contemplate their actions.

This study contributes novel insights by demonstrating that non-verbal rewards function as effective social reinforcement in shaping the moral character of students with special needs, thereby extending the concept of reflective, Islamic-based reward and punishment that integrates authority, empathy, and contextual adaptation. However, the approach is limited by variability in teacher implementation, challenges of generalisation across diverse special needs populations, and reduced effectiveness for students with severe sensory or communication impairments. Despite these limitations, the findings offer practical guidance for adapting balanced and empathetic reward–punishment strategies within diverse special education settings.

6.0 Conclusion

This study highlights that the reward and punishment strategies employed by special education teachers are pivotal in shaping the moral character and positive behavior of students with special needs. Teachers demonstrate prudence by customizing rewards to individual student needs and aligning them with Islamic moral values. Consistency in reinforcement helps students link positive behavior with recognition, thereby promoting sustained moral development.

Punishment is approached reflectively, compassionately, and prudently, avoiding physical or emotionally harmful measures while balancing firmness with empathy. Collectively, these strategies serve not only as behaviorist tools for managing behavior, but also as vehicles for instilling Islamic moral values through guidance and care. The study underscores the need for continuous professional training to help teachers strengthen their capacity to adapt behavioural management strategies anchored in values, empathy, and the students' individual uniqueness.

This study is limited to a small, purposively selected group of Islamic Education teachers in primary schools implementing the PPKI program; therefore, the findings may not be transferable to all types of special needs students or other special education contexts. Future research may extend this work by examining how reward and punishment strategies are adapted across different school levels, cultural contexts, and educational systems, as well as for students with diverse functional abilities and learning needs, while incorporating student and parent perspectives to deepen understanding of how these strategies are experienced and refined.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study advances the field by evidencing how empathetic, non-verbal and reflective disciplinary strategies serve as powerful tools for internalizing Islamic moral values among students with special needs. It offers a comprehensive framework that integrates behaviorist principles with ethical, student-centered adaptations relevant to inclusive moral education.

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