

## Rewards: An Acknowledgement of Merit or Privilege?

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### Abstract

In any society, the privileged group gradually sets the norms and standards of living of any society, and the rest are the groups who then aspire to achieve that lifestyle. It becomes the characteristic of the dominant group to establish their culture as ‘the culture’. This setting of standards also gets its way into schools. These are groups whose performance unconsciously gets marked as ‘good performances’. For acknowledging those performances, rewards often follow. Must we forget about the underlying privileges responsible for this? The underlying privilege becomes so functional in our everyday lives that we tend to become oblivious to its presence. This obliviousness tends to naturalise the differences in students' performances and results in the reproduction of inequalities even in the school class, which is supposed to be equal for all. This paper attempts to look critically at how much these rewards justify the performances of students in the context of a school class when the level of performance is set as per students coming from certain groups of society, while the hard work of the rest is going unrewarded.

**Keywords:** *Performance, Rewards, Privilege, Progress, Standardization*

In a school class, some days are special for the students. These days are not like the other days because these are days when students get their rewards for their performance. Those special days also occur at the school level, but here we will limit our discussion to the school class only. In a school class, those special days include giving rewards to the students who have performed well in the class. These rewards come in various forms. In materialistic and non-materialistic forms – praise, patting on the back, hugs, attention and many more. The idea behind the distribution of rewards is to acknowledge students' hard work and reward them accordingly. So the good performer gets the rewards, and the poor performers get to sit back and clap for the others.

There is a difference between a good performance in class and a performance that is not considered ‘good’ but includes learning. For instance, when a child has improved from their previous performance and hasn't yet performed in what is being considered desired. Situations like this leave us with a few questions: What should we reward students for? Should we reward them for their performance or the amount of learning that has happened since the previous assessment? Should we reward them for the final

result or the efforts they put in during the learning process?

Years after years, this process happens and keeps happening. Both students and teachers get habituated to only rewarding the performances up to a certain level. This narrows the understanding of good performance only, which could be rewarded. Leaving other students to accept that they are not performing up to that desired level is not learning. This again raises a few questions: What's the reference point for marking good or poor performance? Did the students receiving the rewards actually do that much hard work? Leading us to the question of how justified these rewards are. These questions never come into the purview of teachers while rewarding the ‘good performers’ and expecting the ‘poor performers’ to sit and clap. Ignorance of these questions is the first step leading to the naturalisation of the situation.

Along with the teacher's perception of students, it also affects the student's perception of themselves. Gradually pushing them to believe that no matter what they do, they are destined not to improve. These questions in a school class before rewarding the supposedly ‘good performers’ only will lead towards breaking this notion that only these children are to be

rewarded and minted it will open up space for the teacher to critically think about the position of a child concerning their position in society and consequently in the class and not the class as an isolated entity.

Rewards in a school class, given based on performance, very extrinsically separate the students into two groups – the talented, hard-working students who can perform as per the expectations and make good use of the education provided by the school (as considered by the school). And the others who are not talented and hard-working enough to uphold the expectations in their performance. What we are doing here is we are setting up bars for the performance. The bars, initially invisible, get legitimised and desired when we attach rewards to them. The bar should be the same for each child if they start from the same level. In a school class, it could be said that every child is getting the same teacher, syllabus, textbooks, and education; hence, they all start from the same level. Only these statements are at a very superficial level, without considering the child's life outside the school. In reality, this starting ground is not the same for each child.

Children in a school come from diverse backgrounds. Diversity in the case of India exists majorly in the form of economic class, region, language, caste, culture, and gender. Different policies have repeatedly addressed that each child comes from a different background, and the attempts to put them into the same cast hamper their educational experience.

“The distance between the child's everyday life and the content of the textbook further accentuates the transformation of knowledge into a load. A common source of alienation of subject-matter from the children's perspective and life is the presentation of the life-style and worldview of the urban well-off class. The most common message that children get from the textbooks is that the life ordinary people live is 'wrong' or irrational.” (Learning without burden report, 1993).

On that account, each child has a different starting point. Different starting points come with different needs and levels of scaffolding.

Consider the case where a child is coming from a nearby locality. Both of the parents are working in good positions. The child is encouraged to take part in different activities going on in school. After school, the child goes to a coaching centre. At home, there is easy access to various online learning platforms. In the same class, another child has to walk for around forty minutes. Both parents work in the home, but the income hardly gets them throughout the month, making coaching or any other extra support a faraway dream for the child. Only one of the parents is literate, but as the parents work late, the child has no support at home. The internet availability is minimal, and only when the parents are at home, that is, at night, the child gets limited access to the internet. Outside the school, these all contribute to the child's good, average, or poor performance inside the class.

In this situation, the first child has better access to resources than the second child. It is not only about the materialistic resources but also the home environment. The level of support, motivation, involvement of others, the cultural dispositions the child gets, and social assets all contribute to the child's learning in general and specifically at the school. Along with learning, it also impacts how the child shows their learning through class performance.

At this point, we can say that in a school class, some children are in a privileged position in society, the privilege which puts them or helps them to get to the position or, say, the standards which schools demand from their students. The economic, cultural or social privilege puts the child in a better position than the others. As defined by Peggy McIntosh (1989), privilege is “an invisible unearned package of assets which count on cashing in each day. This unearned advantage rests more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex and ethnic identity. It is the conditions of daily experiences which one takes for granted.” This privilege comes in the form of endowments and contributes to the ascribed status within society. In an unsaid form, children from privileged families get some advantages in their respective situations over

others in educational institutions. Whether it be the ease of access to the school, the availability of resources for doing the projects and activities, having people at home who understand the activities going on in the school and guides the child accordingly, the guaranteed access to education or even the representation of their 'culture' and 'way of living' in the textbooks and school curriculum. The lack of children who do not have these resources are seen as "something that just happens rather than as indicative of durable inequalities that ensure that the odds are stacked in the favor of upper-class students... Presented as established middle-class common sense, discourses of merit and individual achievement ignore the social and economic factors that produce meritorious candidates" (Gilberston, 2016)

Looking back to the questions with which we have stated, there could be the following inferences drawn – While setting standards keeping the privileged child at the centre, by considering the privilege as the norm, at the surface level, tells that the privilege and the resources with which it comes from are the desired norms which one must have to have a dignified life. A close look will show that this is not only the setting of norms but also the rejection of the way of living of the children in less privileged positions. In this process, each child's performance is viewed from the lens of these standards. Performance is not looked at from the individual position of each child. Nothing is considered from where they are coming from, the resources to which they have access, and their cultural and social dispositions in society. The child is seen as a blank slate on which the school assumes a role to write, which is never the case. Looking at their performances from their position, we can see each child working to improve their performance.

Year after year, this has been reproduced in the school class. This reproduction of privilege is naturalized to the extent that schools tend to become oblivious. The obliviousness, silence, and even denial are what gets manifested in the form of merits. This complete focus on merit and the obliviousness of the privilege in play behind

the curtains is another reward for these children. On the one hand, these rewards constantly make way for a group of children and, on the other hand, challenge the work done by the other group by telling them constantly that they haven't learnt enough yet. This is how the privileged status of a child in society gets entailed with setting standards of performance in a school class. In this process, a group of children is left behind, as emphasized by Bonilla-Silva "...socially bounded groups that do not attain success are seen as not having worked hard, rather than seen as subject to unfair systemic disadvantages. The obedient narrative then becomes that they deserve the failure they encounter." ((Bonilla-Silva, 2014 cited in Laavanya and Saroja, 2022) Later on, this gets legitimized by the giving of rewards, which now completely leaves behind the less privileged students.

### **Role of teacher and a vision for the class**

What a teacher can do in the class is acknowledge each child's efforts. As for the rewards as well, there could be small things that could be incorporated into the daily classroom transactions for this acknowledgement. Small materialistic items like stamps on answer sheets or notebooks, words of appreciation, pats on the head or back and many such things could be used. This will help to make each child feel appreciated for their efforts. Each student should be rewarded as per their progress and not only based on a standardised level of 'good performance'. For this, the teacher has to create an environment that will accept each child as a whole and not just by separating them by their social environment outside the school. Different cultural practices and lifestyles could be included in the daily discussions of classrooms, including their knowledge system in the daily discourse of the classroom and not only what is prescribed in the textbooks.

Each student comes from a different socio-cultural and economic background. All of them carry certain cultural dispositions with them. In a school class, each of them deserves their space. Different backgrounds have an impact on the performance of a child in one aspect or another.

School class is an inclusive space that can assess the performances of each child based on their previous performances and the consideration of their socio-economic position. The class could be a safe space for each child to express themselves freely. Expressing not from the perspective of what is desired from them only

but also what and how they want to express themselves, using the dispositions they are carrying from their homes and culture. Rewarding not from the perspective of what is desired standard of performance but based on their progress in learning.

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