

## The Token Economy Method in Reducing Off-Task Behavior Among Elementary School Students

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**Abstract.** Off-task behavior is described as undesired actions in a classroom learning situation. Therefore, this research aimed to analyze the implementation of a token economy in reducing off-task behavior among elementary school students. The sample consisted of five elementary school teachers based on the location and a descriptive qualitative method was adopted using a case study. Additionally, data collection methods included observation, interviews, and documentation. The data were processed using domain analysis through the stages of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The research showed that the implementation of token economy effectively reduced off-task behavior among students during the learning process. The implemented token economy comprised positive and negative reinforcement and punishment, as well as rewards and penalties. Moreover, other methods, such as ice-breaking activities, advice, and motivation, were used as additional reinforcements or support in mitigating off-task behavior among students.

**Keywords:** motivation, off-task behavior, punishment, reward, token economy

## Teknik Token Ekonomi dalam Mengurangi Perilaku yang Tidak Dikehendaki (*Off-Task Behavior*) pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar

**Abstrak.** Perilaku yang tidak dikehendaki (*off-task behavior*) adalah sebutan bagi tingkah laku yang tidak diinginkan kemunculannya dalam situasi belajar di kelas. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis pelaksanaan token ekonomi dalam mengurangi perilaku yang tidak dikehendaki pada siswa sekolah dasar dari perspektif guru. Responden dalam penelitian ini adalah lima orang guru sekolah dasar sesuai dengan lokasi penelitian. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan observasi, wawancara dan dokumentasi. Data diolah menggunakan analisis domain melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan token ekonomi memberikan dampak yang efektif dalam mengurangi perilaku yang tidak dikehendaki siswa pada saat proses belajar. Bentuk token ekonomi yang diimplementasikan berupa penguatan dan hukuman positif dan negatif, serta penghargaan dan hukuman. Selain menerapkan token ekonomi, beberapa metode lain seperti pemberian *ice breaking*, nasihat, motivasi sebagai penguatan tambahan ataupun pendukung dalam mengurangi perilaku yang tidak dikehendaki siswa.

**Kata Kunci:** hukuman, motivasi, penghargaan, perilaku yang tidak dikehendaki, token ekonomi

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Off-task behavior among elementary school students is becoming a major concern in education. Research shows that this behavior disrupts the teaching and learning process as well as affects the academic achievement of students (Godwin et al, 2016). In this context, students completely engage in other behaviors that are not in line with learning activities. Off-task behavior affects the attention of students in the class (Godwin et al, 2016; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Furthermore, off-task behavior can impact student learning at various levels. At the individual level, the learning process may be neglected following the failure to practice the skills taught in class. At the group level, the disruption caused by students getting out of seats or being aggressive (off-task behavior) leads to this behavior (Shofuhah, 2016).

Based on the description above, off-task behavior is caused by various factors, namely, getting attention from adults and peers or the opportunity to do preferred activities. Examples include talking to friends or playing with objects and being able to escape or avoid unexpected activities, such as writing or reading (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010; Lee, 2014). This behavior can be seen in students who skip school, do not participate in teaching and learning activities, and fail to work on assignments. The commencement occurs when preferred activities are carried out, such as playing or talking to friends. The results showed that there were several disruptive behaviors reported in elementary school students in Surabaya, namely

walking in class, changing seats during learning, talking or being loud, disturbing and teasing friends, as well as doing unrelated activities such as playing with stationery (Patty, 2016). The off-task behaviors of students include impulsive behavior, inattention, non-completion of tasks, being out of the seat, talking without permission, failure to learn, unpreparedness, and being disruptive (Zuhara et al, 2021).

Token economy is an essential method for behavior modification (Martin & Pear, 2019; Tan et al, 2022). The method is based on Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory, where reinforcement and punishment influence human behavior. Since positive behavior is rewarded, students are motivated to show valued behavior (Tan et al, 2022). Therefore, rewards are essential to the token economy technique (Martin & Pear, 2019). Students are entitled to a token when expected behavior is shown and this can be exchanged for a backup reinforcer (Permatasari & Rifameutia, 2023). Tokens can be in stickers, coins, and tickets given directly showing an expected behavior.

Based on initial observations, most of the parents have a fairly high educational background believed to influence parenting patterns in supporting the learning of students. Additionally, economic background in the middle to upper category gives social status. These factors potentially influence student behavior and trigger off-task behavior in the learning process, including motivation and participation.

Research on implementing token economy methods to reduce off-task behavior presents novelty in behavior modification within educational environments. This method focuses on providing incentives in the form of tokens collected and exchanged for prizes to motivate students in academic tasks. An effective positive reinforcement system is also created to reduce deviant or off-task behavior that often hinders the learning process.

Several research showed that token economy-based group counseling has successfully increased engagement in academic activities, directly reducing unwanted off-task behavior (Dewi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the combination of the method with shaping effectively extends the duration of on-task behavior in children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), supporting academic success through increased focus and self-control (Widihapsari & Yoenanto, 2021).

The novelty of this research lies in the qualitative analysis of the token economy implementation. This explores in depth the experiences and perspectives of the token economy. For example, the qualitative analysis provides insight into the understanding of teachers and students regarding the implementation, the obstacles faced, and variations in different classes. This method is relevant to understanding the uniqueness of the context, such as the culture or socio-economic conditions of the school.

## Method

This research used a qualitative descriptive method and the informants were five class teachers with criteria for using token economy in the learning process. This research was conducted in three Elementary Schools (SD) in Medan City, namely MI AH, SD IT SA, and SD IT JN. The type of observation was informant observation, which comprised directly observing teachers and students. The semi-structured interviews were related to indicators of token economy and off-task behavior (Moleong, 2017). Interviews were conducted with class teachers as primary data. Furthermore, secondary data regarding student behavior and documentation was obtained from guidance and counseling teachers. The primary data source was the class teacher, while the secondary data were the assignment book, attendance, and teacher notes. The data analysis used the Milles and Huberman Model, which includes reduction, presentation, and conclusions (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Meanwhile, the validity used the source triangulation method through observations and interviews.

## Results

This research aimed to analyze the implementation of a token economy in reducing off-task behavior among elementary school students. The results focused on types of off-task behavior in students and the influence of token economy. Data from interviews with

teachers who teach in class showed that students had off-task behavior problems during teaching and learning activities.

**Table 1**

*Study Themes and Indicators*

Theme	Indicator	Source
Off-Task Behavior	Lack of focus on activities	(Bandura, 1986; Skinner, 1953)
	Irrelevant activities	
	Resistance to direction	
Token Economy Technique	Token rewarding	
	Token exchange	
	Additional reinforcement	
	Consistent rule enforcement	
	Reward and punishment approach	

The data showed that students in class were quite dominant in kinesthetic and audiovisual abilities. With these characteristics, students may become more active and varied in learning. Therefore, the behavior becomes an obstacle in the learning process.

*"With the kinesthetic and audiovisual type of children, students are easily restless, frustrated, have difficulty being orderly in listening to something for a long time, and have difficulty with written assignments. Some students also joke and tease each other outside the teacher's supervision." (Interview, August 2024)*

This is in contrast to the behavior of other students, where class conditions change depending on the subject teacher and class management.

*"In certain subjects, students in a non-conductive class become an obstacle in the learning process, such as playing with toys, drawing when not learning to draw, and making toys out of paper." (Interview, August 2024)*

Even though the behavior of students is conducive in certain subjects, the class often becomes non-conductive after implementing rules. In contrast to the situation in subject three, several situations made the class unconductive.

*"Sometimes, there are not conducive situations, such as noise and not paying attention to the teacher. Obstacles in delivering learning, namely students who disturb each other, tell stories, and play. The learning process is sometimes also disrupted by fights and teasing." (Interview, August 2024)*

The subsequent case considered is the situation in subject four.

*"When delivering lessons, sometimes concentration is disturbed by children who tell stories on their benches, walk around, children who play on their benches, children who sleep in class." (Interview, August 2024)*

The data obtained from class subject five showed that students often engage in off-task behavior.

*"When given assertiveness and ice breaking, the class becomes very conducive, but after a while, the class starts to get noisy. Some students have difficulty receiving lessons, telling stories, and disturbing friends, which can be obstacles and disrupt the learning process." (Interview, August 2024)*

Based on the data obtained, off-task behavior refers to indicators of a lack of focus in learning activities. These include irrelevant activities and resistance to direction with forms of behavior, such as going to the bathroom repeatedly and not collecting assignments. Additionally, off-task behavior can be in the form of not agreeing when asked to come forward by the teacher, joking and teasing each other, playing with toys, telling stories, and sleeping.

The implementation of token economy minimizes the forms of off-task behavior. In subject one, this method is considered effective at a score of 8 from a range of 1 to 10 in increasing the enthusiasm for following class agreements. Other methods, such as giving advice and motivation reduce off-task behavior.

*"Token economy will be implemented in the form of reward stars in the form of parcels that will be given to two people who have the most stars in their attendance. Students are increasingly enthusiastic when implementing token economy and the enthusiasm to compete to be better in following class agreements." (Interview, August 2024)*

The implementation carried out by subject two uses other methods in the form of ice-breaking and giving punishment to students who violate the rules.

*"Token economy is implemented in the form of reward stars for children who are orderly in learning and finally get prizes for books, pencils, and erasers. Students are happy when the token economy is implemented, and students become more orderly and motivated." (Interview, August 2024)*

The implementation in class subject three rewards students in the form of additional values and snacks preferred by students without giving credit points. Is 90% very effective in reducing off-task behavior. Therefore, students increasingly compete with the rewards given by teachers and become accustomed to limiting bad behavior.

*"The token economy implemented in class is in the form of additional values and snacks given to students who can follow the learning well. Students are more easily guided to positive things and are happy and motivated by implementing this technique." (Interview, August 2024)*

An economic method is implemented in class subjects four, one, and two. These include reward star savings, made from pieces of paper, and piggy banks attached to the classroom walls. The method is considered 80% effective in reducing bad attitudes among students. The implementation carried out by subject four is also supported by another method, such as ice-breaking.

*"The most rewarded stars savings will get a pencil box prize, hence students try their best to be disciplined, good, and diligent. They are also enthusiastic about the implementation of the token economy." (Interview, August 2024)*

The implementation of an economic method in class subject five is in the form of

reward stars attached to student books. This is considered quite effective when accompanied by the provision of punishments and rewards. The method was carried out by subject five and was supported by ice-breaking when the class became uncondusive.

*“Every week, the reward stars stickers will be counted, and students with stars will be given chocolate snacks. Students compete to get stars, thereby raising students’ enthusiasm and motivation to behave well.” (Interview, August 2024)*

Research showed that token economy in teaching and learning activities based on the indicators of token provision and exchange, included rewards in the form of gifts. The method also takes the form of reward star savings made from paper slips exchanged for points. The rules for giving are carried out consistently and continuously since students are accustomed to following the rules and reducing off-task behavior. Additional reinforcement is provided through advice, motivation, and ice-breaking. In addition to giving awards, punishment is also part of teacher education in the form of reducing stars when students behave badly or do not earn prizes. The informants have implemented the token economy with various creativity, and the impact effectively reduces off-task behavior.

## **Discussion**

Some experts describe off-task behavior, including impulsive action, ignoring, failure to complete assignments, talking without permission, not being motivated to learn or

participate in class activities, and being disruptive. Engaging in off-task behavior during teaching and learning leads to academic failure, such as low achievement in lessons, repeating the class, and failing the final exam (Zhao & Zhao, 2021). The presence of disruptive peers in the classroom reduces the time other students spend on assignments, affects teaching practices, and hinders learning. Impulsive and disruptive behavior can contribute to more serious problems, such as mental health conditions and decreased academic engagement, with long-term implications for failure (Marshall et al, 2024).

A survey conducted by Zenius Education (2015), which started in September and ended in December 2014, entitled “Survei Opini Siswa tentang Sekolah, Guru, dan Orang Tua” (Student Opinion Survey on Schools, Teachers, and Parents), collected responses from 1,340 students. This survey revealed that the activities unrelated to learning were not carried out in class, such as chatting with friends, playing on cellphones, playing games, listening to music, replying to messages, updating statuses, and taking selfies on social media. Febrianti and Suhaili’s (2021) research also showed that students’ off-task behaviors have distinct characteristics and varying tendencies, including motoric off-task behavior, verbal off-task behavior, and passive off-task behavior. Therefore, this research also found several forms of off-task behavior in elementary school students during learning.



The off-task behavior of students can impact learning both individually and in groups. Academic performance can be neglected when skills taught in class cannot be practiced. As for the effect on the group, disruption occurs when students get up from seats or act aggressively in completing assignments. Off-task behavior affects individual learning outcomes and damages the intrinsic motivation of affected students (Filcheck et al, 2004; Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972; Wangdi & Namgyel, 2022). Students frequently exposed to aggressive or disruptive behavior in the classroom feel less motivated to learn and show decreased academic performance (Parker et al, 2021).

The classroom teacher is responsible for controlling the learning atmosphere and solving off-task behavior problems using modification. The token economy is a form of psychotherapy that rewards students after performing certain behavior. Credit points are a prerequisite for obtaining positive reinforcement in achieving certain behavior. The method covers two directions, namely short-term and long-term. Short-term orientation is when students can perform the expected behavior to earn credit points. Meanwhile, long-term orientation is a consistent performance of a behavior that leads to improvements and entitlement to greater positive reinforcement from the credit points collected (Saifuddin, 2022).

Based on the description above, this research explored the implementation and

effectiveness of the token economy by five elementary school teachers. In this context, the learning styles are predominantly kinesthetic and audiovisual. Therefore, the behavior is inseparable from wanting to move, such as being easily restless, inability to stay in a seat, frustrated in listening to something while sitting for a long time, having difficulty being orderly for a long time, teasing/hitting friends and drawing outside the context of learning. Students with kinesthetic preferences or active learning styles need space to move which naturally reduces restless behavior and increases engagement (Purington, 2021). Token economy gives star stickers or rewards daily to well-behaved students. Every month, the teacher explains the mechanism for getting stars, which will be calculated at the end of the class. Students with the highest collection will become class stars the following month and get prizes from the teacher, such as stationery.

The token economy in the form of daily star acquisition which has an impact on reducing off-task behavior, in line with evidence from previous studies that the token economy is effective in reducing impulsive and undisciplined behavior (Morano et al, 2021; Radhamani & Kalaivani, 2023). In addition, teachers also punish students who violate rules, such as fighting as well as talking during teaching and learning activities by taking back the stars earned. Reinforcement is also provided in the form of motivation and advice to respect teachers and behave well. The obstacles are

sometimes forgotten in giving tokens at the end of the learning activity, which triggers students to engage in bad learning behavior. Some are rarely present, which causes a lack of interest in following the token economy concept.

The conduciveness of the classroom atmosphere depends on the management of the class during the teaching and learning process. Behavior outside the learning context sometimes appears, such as secretly playing with toys and paper. The combination of rewards and punishments can direct students toward desired behavior (Skinner, 1953). Rules and agreements regarding behavior or activities prohibited during learning have a fairly effective impact on reducing unwanted behavior. Furthermore, Canter and Canter (2001) explained the importance of consistency in classroom management, helping students understand the relationship between actions and consequences. The token economy system is a behavior modification method that is very flexible and easily adjusted to class needs. A combination of positive (giving tokens) and negative reinforcement (revoking tokens or reprimands) can provide optimal results in managing behavior (Cooper et al., 2020; Hackenberg, 2009; Miltenberger, 2015). The implementation of the token economy makes students more orderly and motivated to show good behavior in the learning process. This method gives a happy reaction when stars are collected.

Token economy can be implemented by directly giving rewards without credit points.

This behavior is part of positive reinforcement, namely giving something pleasant or valuable after the manifestation of the desired behavior. This increases the motivation to continue conducting similar activities. Students also feel motivated not to act outside the learning context because of the reward for the added score.

The provision of the token economy starts with the teacher discussing the concept of providing tokens when the targeted behavior appears. The tokens can be exchanged for prizes as the main positive reinforcement after collection. Providing assertiveness as well as implementing regulations and token economy can reduce stars after exhibiting bad behavior. The reactions to implementing the method allow students to obtain stars and reduce off-task behavior. Additional awards also strengthen behavior by providing social validation for success (Bandura, 1986).

For teachers, implementing the token economy to reduce off-task behavior poses many challenges. This is influenced by culture, socio-economic conditions, and school environment. In addition, special training for teachers is needed to ensure more effective implementation (Filcheck et al, 2004; Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972; Shakespeare et al, 2018). Each school has unique characteristics influencing the effectiveness of behavior management strategies such as token economies. For example, culture affects the response of students to reinforcement or punishment. In some cultures, certain forms of rewards may be more acceptable than in others.



Socio-economic conditions are also a significant factor, as students from middle to upper-class backgrounds may respond to reinforcement differently than lower-class socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, teachers in upper-class socio-economic environments have different methods of reinforcing due to differences in needs and expectations (Mahendra, 2024).

There are several important principles, according to Skinner (1953), in the implementation of token economy, including 1) Consistency- Punishment and reinforcement should be implemented consistently, allowing students to understand the relationship between behavior and the consequences, 2) Immediate- Reinforcement or punishment needs to be given immediately after the behavior occurs to strengthen the causal relationship, 3) Proportionality- The punishment or reinforcement given should be by the level of behavior to avoid loss of motivation (Hitchcock et al, 2024; Mahendra, 2024; Hasanah et al, 2024). Skinner (1953) emphasized that even though punishment could suppress negative behavior, the effects were often temporary and caused side effects, such as fear or anxiety. Therefore, the use of reinforcement is preferred to create long-term behavioral changes. Teachers can create a more structured learning environment and support the development of positive student behavior by understanding the combination of reinforcement and punishment.

This study provides evidence of the effective implementation of token economy in reducing off-task behavior of students during the classroom learning process. Through a qualitative approach, the results of this study provide an understanding of the application of diverse token economy according to the unique context of the respondents' cultural and socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, the additional reinforcement supporting the implementation of token economy is an interesting finding. However, the generalizability of these research results is limited and may not necessarily be applicable to other problem contexts or to broader, more diverse populations.

## **Conclusions**

This research qualitatively explores in depth the experiences and perspectives of the token economy in reducing off-task behavior of elementary school students. In conclusion, implementing token economy had a fairly effective impact on reducing the off-task behavior of students. This method could be executed through ice-breaking advice, motivation, rewards, and punishments for additional reinforcement or support.

## **Suggestion**

For teachers and schools, the effective implementation of token economy through a variety of methods need to be attempted to reduce off-task behavior of students, thereby supporting effective teaching and learning.

activities in the classroom. Opportunities were also opened up to other researchers to further explore the effectiveness of token economy in various contexts and populations using a variety of more sophisticated methods. Moreover, further investigation could add other variables, such as factors influencing the success of the method to enrich the academic literature in the field of educational psychology and development of students' adaptive behavior.

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