Promoting Self-Regulation and Academic Accountability Through Classroom Economy Systems: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review was to examine how classroom economy systems influenced student self-regulation and homework completion within elementary learning environments. The research that was reviewed suggested that classroom economies, derived from behavioral learning theories, had been effective tools for improving motivation, engagement, and accountability. Studies indicated that when token economies or similar reinforcement systems were implemented with consistency and ethical fading practices, students demonstrated increased task completion, responsibility, and independence. Further, the literature revealed a connection between external reinforcement and the gradual development of intrinsic motivation, as well as a positive impact on students' academic behaviors such as homework completion. This synthesis provided a foundation for examining the effects of a classroom economy intervention that combined behavioral reinforcement and self-regulated learning principles to foster accountability in elementary students.

Keywords: classroom economy, self-regulation, homework completion, token economy, motivation

Chapter II: Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Classroom Economy Systems

Classroom economy systems were grounded in long-standing theories of learning that emphasized the connection between behavior and consequence. The foundational ideas of behaviorism and social learning provided the theoretical basis for understanding how reinforcement could shape student behavior and motivation. Smith et al. (2022) highlighted that education heavily began to be influenced by these behaviorists' approaches, from the 1960's onwards. B.F. Skinner's work in operant conditioning helped establish the principle that behaviors are influenced by the outcomes they produced (Tan et. al 2022). Dalal and Kusum (2025) referenced Skinner's theory, noting that "behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences- namely reinforcement and punishment." Within this framework, reinforcement was used to encourage desirable behavior, while punishment discouraged undesirable actions.

Tan et al. (2022) further clarified that a consequence could be positive, in which the person benefits, or negative, in which the outcome results in the person becoming demotivated. Token economies aligned with the concept of positive reinforcement, which focused on providing incentives rather than punishments (Tan et al., 2022). According to Tan et al. (2022), "token economies work on the principle that positive consequences will increase the likelihood of a behavior being repeated." This understanding reflected the broader behaviorist belief that learning was shaped by experience and that consistent feedback could strengthen behavioral patterns.

Social learning perspectives emphasized that students learn not only through direct reinforcement, but also through observing and imitating others (Dalal & Kusum, 2025). Ackerman et al. (2020) noted that "students model the behaviors of peers who are positively

reinforced," which demonstrates the idea that students observe their peers being rewarded and model similar behaviors. Likewise, Dalal and Kusum (2025) observed that "reinforcement strengthens group norms and helps maintain a positive classroom culture." These ideas demonstrated how classroom economies drew from both behavioral and social learning theories to influence both individual and group behavior.

The literature demonstrated that reinforcement could support compliance, but it could go beyond that, developing into intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (LeBlanc, 2004). Dalal and Kusum (2025) described the shift as a move "from externally controlled to internally motivated behaviors, where reinforcement serves as the initial step toward developing autonomy." This change reflected a growing understanding that structure and feedback could help students internalize responsibility for their actions. These principles of reinforcement and observation can translate into classroom practice in the form of structured reward systems, like token economies.

Defining Reward Systems and Token Economies

Within this theoretical framework, reward systems and token economies emerged as practical applications of reinforcement theory. Smith et al. (2022) reviewed the history of reward systems, beginning with stating that "the use of rewards is a well-entrenched practice in education," and has been linked to behaviorist approaches. Smith et al. (2022) noted that the use of rewards was "increasingly common," in elementary schools, and used somewhat in middle schools. According to Smith et al. (2022), "reward systems are an important piece of classroom management strategies and are one of the main ways to regulate various aspects of the classroom functioning." In addition, they identified a token economy as a type of "reinforcement-based practice," that falls under the category of a reward system.

Dalal and Kusum (2025) added that token economies “have been used and expanded upon for many decades, across educational and therapeutic contexts.” This demonstrates their flexibility and enduring relevance. Similarly, Samburgo (2017) observed that “the token economy, as a classroom management system, has been implemented for many years and continues to be employed by numerous teachers.” Together, these studies illustrated the continued importance of reward-based systems in supporting student behavior and engagement.

According to Tan et al. (2022), a token economy is a system where participants are given tokens as a form of positive reinforcement, when a desired behavior is demonstrated. In addition, Tan et al. (2022), states that “a token economy is classified as positive reinforcement because it gives incentives to participants rather than giving punishments.” Smith et al. (2022) identified token economies as a specific type of reward system, describing them as structures in which “students earn tokens, points, or privileges that can later be exchanged for desired items or experiences.” Heiniger et al (2022) specifically defines a token economy as: “a system in which tokens that are earned for engaging in desired behavior can be exchanged for items or activities that are reinforcing for the student in order to change challenging behaviors into more prosocial or expected behaviors.”

Tokens are a part of a token economy and can take many forms, but should be a neutral stimulus (Doll et al., 2013). Chips, tickets, coins, fake money, stamps, tallies, or stickers were identified across the literature as options to utilize as tokens. The type of token varied based on the group of students that the token economy systems are being used for. Doll et al. (2013) suggested that younger students might need a more concrete or tangible token, like a coin, opposed to something more abstract, like a point or checkmark. These tokens should be

presented immediately as participants demonstrate the target behavior and then exchanged for some type of reward, which could be anything from a title to a tangible item. (Doll et al., 2013).

Rewards are another part of a token economy system. As Salmon (2015) noted, students are observed meeting a desired behavior, then they can exchange their received tokens for a reward. In that specific study, students earned "points," which were translated into cents that were placed in student accounts, which they could later redeem at their "Student Store." Doll et al. (2013) mentioned that "the more items or rewards you can exchange for the token, the more powerful the token becomes." The rewards should be a variety of preferred items, according to Doll et al., 2013. Robacker et al. (2013) shared something similar and suggested that the reward should reflect a student's interest, as it will be something a student wants to earn. Barnes (1981) additionally explained that students will respond to the reward system if they see there is a "reasonable chance of success," and that the reward is "worth the effort needed to succeed."

Collectively, the literature described token economies as structured, reinforcement-based systems that connected student effort to tangible outcomes. While definitions varied, researchers agreed that token economies relied on consistency, clear expectations, and positive reinforcement to maintain student engagement and behavior (Ackerman et al., 2020) (Smith et al., 2022) (Tan et al., 2022). These systems represented more than just behavior management tools; they served as frameworks that helped teachers create predictable and supportive learning environments. Understanding how reward systems and token economies operate provides important context for examining why they are used in classrooms and what purposes they serve.

The Purpose of Classroom Economy Systems

The primary purpose of classroom economy systems was to create structured environments where students could clearly see the connection between effort, behavior, and

reward. Classroom economy systems are used as a positive reinforcement tool. Tan et. al (2022) stated that token economies are an aid to help teachers with the disruptive behavior of students, specifically younger learners and students with special needs. Dalal and Kusum (2025) identified that the "basic purpose" of a token economy was to "enhance desirable behavior, while reducing undesirable activity."

The purpose of the classroom economy system depended largely on the goal of the targeted behavior in selected groups. Some of the literature identified studies that used token economy systems that focused on behavior management. For example, Samburgo (2017) identified the following as target behaviors in students with disabilities in a middle school classroom: being on task, seating, and talking.

Other studies were designed to create structured environments where effort and achievement were visibly connected. Salmon (2015) looked specifically into whether differences existed in academic achievement in classrooms that utilized token economies, opposed to those that did not. It was important that students were provided with "tangible evidence of progress," while responsibility, goal setting, and delayed gratification were being emphasized (Salmon, 2015). Another study, conducted by Theodore et al. 2009) intended to look at improving the homework completion rates of fourth-grade students. Homework completion was specifically defined in this study as "the submission of completed daily assigned homework upon the arrival of class." While Reller (2016) conducted a study that investigated the effectiveness of token economies combined with specific praise was on on-task behavior in the classroom. The purpose identified was to improve the attendance, homework completion, and on-task behavior in a general education setting of fourth-grade students.

Dalal and Kusum (2025) noted that classroom economies “serve as powerful tools for promoting self-regulation and motivation when implemented consistently and purposefully.” Their structure provided a clear system through which students could understand expectations and recognize how their actions contributed to personal and collective success.

Overall, the purpose of classroom economy systems was to empower students to take ownership of their actions, either behavioral or motivational, and connect classroom behaviors with lifelong skills. Through reinforcement, reflection, and autonomy, these systems created an environment where students could experience the immediate benefits of effort while building habits of persistence and self-control. The literature suggested that when implemented intentionally and consistently, classroom economies functioned as powerful frameworks for fostering motivation, accountability, and independence (Ackerman et al., 2020) (Dalal & Kusum, 2025) (Heiniger et al., 2022) (Salmon, 2015). Their purpose is aligned closely with broader educational goals of nurturing self-regulated learners who are prepared to succeed both academically and personally.

Implementation of Classroom Economy Systems

The implementation of classroom economy systems required intentional planning, consistency, and alignment with classroom goals. Researchers emphasized that these systems worked most effectively when teachers established clear expectations, structured reinforcement schedules, and communicated consistent procedures from the outset (Ackerman et al., 2020) (Dalal & Kusum, 2025). Ackerman et al. (2020) outlined six essential components of successful implementation: identifying target behaviors, defining reinforcers, selecting tokens, setting exchange rates, developing clear rules, and creating a plan for fading reinforcement. When teachers explicitly taught these components, students understood both what behaviors were

valued and how their efforts would be recognized. This clarity was found to increase fairness, predictability, and engagement within the classroom community (Ackerman et al., 2020).

Salmon (2015) found that successful implementation also depended on how classroom economies were introduced and maintained. Barnes (1981) suggested that when implementing goals should be specific, and established with time frames, for students to measure their progress. Teachers who framed the system as an opportunity for growth rather than a disciplinary measure created more positive classroom environments. “When reinforcement is proactive and clearly linked to expectations,” Salmon (2015) observed, “students internalize the behaviors being reinforced rather than simply working for external rewards.” Similarly, Dalal and Kusum (2025) concluded that “consistency and fairness are critical to sustaining student motivation in reinforcement-based systems.” These findings demonstrated that careful implementation was as important as the system itself.

Implementation also relied on balancing teacher control with student involvement. Heiniger et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of gradually transferring responsibility to students through self-monitoring and peer accountability. When students tracked their own earnings or managed parts of the system, they demonstrated greater ownership and independence. Teachers who included students in decision-making- such as choosing rewards or setting class goals- helped them develop autonomy and internal motivation. These collaborative practices reflected a developmental shift from external control to student-driven regulation, aligning with theories of self-determination and self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2000).

Researchers also noted that flexibility and reflection were critical to effective implementation. While structure provided consistency, rigid systems could become ineffective if not adjusted for student needs. Heiniger et al. (2022) found that teachers who regularly reflected

on system effectiveness and modified reinforcement schedules based on student progress maintained higher engagement levels. Scott (1998) similarly advised that reinforcement should be gradually faded as students demonstrated independence, ensuring that motivation transitioned from external rewards to internal satisfaction. Without such fading, students might become dependent on extrinsic reinforcement, undermining long-term self-regulation (Heiniger et al., 2022) (Scott, 1998).

Technology also played an increasingly significant role in implementation. Robacker et al. (2016) examined the use of ClassDojo, a digital classroom economy platform that allowed teachers to award points in real time. The researchers found that digital systems enhanced communication with students and families, provided immediate feedback, and streamlined data tracking. Homer et al. (2018) reported similar results when integrating digital badges into elementary English classrooms, finding that the visual representation of progress increased motivation and sustained participation. These findings suggested that technology-supported classroom economies could improve feedback efficiency and engagement while maintaining the motivational principles of traditional token systems.

Implementation also required teachers to balance reinforcement with authentic learning opportunities. Salmon (2015) noted that connecting classroom economies to financial literacy or mathematics instruction provided students with real-world applications for their earnings. When students managed classroom “bank accounts” or budgets, they practiced numeracy, goal-setting, and decision-making skills. These interdisciplinary connections made classroom economies more meaningful and developmentally appropriate for elementary learners. Dalal and Kusum (2025) argued that such integration “reinforces the relevance of classroom economies by linking them to both behavioral and academic outcomes.” When implemented with purpose, flexibility, and

student involvement, classroom economies became more than management tools- they evolved into dynamic learning systems that cultivated responsibility, cooperation, and self-regulation (Dalal & Kusum, 2025) (Salmon, 2015).

Behavioral Reinforcement and Student Motivation

Behavioral reinforcement played a central role in shaping how classroom economy systems supported student motivation. Reinforcement was based on the idea that desirable behaviors become more likely to recur when followed by positive consequences. Tan et al. (2022) explained that "token economies work on the principle that positive consequences will increase the likelihood of a behavior being repeated." Similarly, Ackerman et al. (2020) found that when teachers consistently reinforced expected behaviors, students remained more engaged and focused during instruction.

Motivation increased when reinforcement was clear, consistent, and fair. Dalal and Kusum (2025) reported that reinforcement systems were most effective when students perceived them as equitable and transparent. They explained that students were more likely to remain motivated when they "understood how their behavior aligned with the expectations set by their teacher." Tybus (2010) also found that teacher enthusiasm and verbal praise enhanced motivation when paired with tangible reinforcement. Additionally, Smith et al. (2022) suggested that tangible rewards be gradually replaced by verbal praise to continue to maintain student motivation. Together, these studies emphasized that reinforcement systems worked best when students felt supported and when teachers maintained consistent, enthusiastic implementation.

Some researchers questioned whether external rewards could reduce students' intrinsic motivation. Akin-Little and Little (2004) examined this concern in an elementary classroom and found no evidence that token systems diminished interest in learning. They reported that

"students continued to demonstrate engagement and persistence even after tokens were removed." Similarly, McGinnis et al. (1999) studied reinforcement in mathematics lessons and found that students who received tokens for completing tasks "maintained high levels of interest in math activities once rewards were discontinued." These findings suggested that reinforcement did not necessarily undermine intrinsic motivation. Instead, when implemented thoughtfully, it could serve as a bridge that helped students move from external motivation toward internal satisfaction.

Technology-based systems also played a growing role in maintaining student motivation. Robacker et al. (2016) studied the use of ClassDojo, a digital token system, and found that "students' motivation increased as feedback became instantaneous and visually engaging." The digital format allowed students to see progress in real time and receive immediate recognition for positive actions. Homer et al. (2018) reported similar findings when using digital badges, noting that "students maintained higher levels of motivation when their progress was visible and celebrated." These tools modernized traditional reinforcement systems while maintaining their behavioral and motivational foundations.

Motivation also deepened when reinforcement was gradually replaced with reflection and self-monitoring. Heiniger et al. (2022) found that when teachers encouraged students to set personal goals and track their own progress, "motivation shifted from earning rewards to achieving self-set goals." Dalal and Kusum (2025) described this as "a motivational shift from earning to understanding," where students began valuing the learning process itself. Over time, reinforcement evolved from a teacher-directed strategy into a student-driven habit, promoting intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning. Classroom economies demonstrated that

reinforcement and intrinsic motivation could coexist, working together to create classrooms where students felt capable, valued, and responsible for their success.

Developing Self-Regulation Through Classroom Economies

A consistent theme across the literature was that classroom economy systems could help students develop self-regulation by gradually transferring responsibility from teacher control to student independence. Zimmerman (2000) described self-regulation as "a cyclical process involving forethought, performance, and self-reflection." Reinforcement initially guided student behavior, but over time, it became a mechanism for teaching reflection, self-monitoring, and goal setting. Heiniger et al. (2022) explained that "as students participate in reinforcement systems, they begin to internalize control of their behavior through self-monitoring and reflection. This demonstrated that classroom economies should shift to guide students from external motivation toward self-directed learning.

Scott (1998) emphasized that token systems should not remain permanent but should instead evolve as students gain independence. Self-management was identified as an effective strategy that facilitates student success and independence (Scott, 1999). Several researchers emphasized the importance of fading. Smith et al. (2022) discussed the idea of transitioning to verbal praise as soon as teachers noticed improvement. Kim et al. (2022) stated that educators should develop a token economy system that fades to promote self-control. This gradual fading process allowed reinforcement to transform from an external incentive into a structure that built internal accountability.

Several researchers highlighted how classroom economies provided scaffolds for developing these self-regulatory habits. Scott (1998) emphasized that token systems should not remain permanent but instead transition toward self-managed routines. In his model, teachers

began by reinforcing specific behaviors, then introduced tools such as behavior charts or self-tracking logs. Similarly, Heiniger et al. (2022) found that fading external reinforcement over time led to stronger independence and accountability. Additionally, Heiniger et al. (2022) stated that fading served as a crucial part to building independence, specifically with the "general education setting," but noted that this could "lead to more independence later in life." This gradual reduction in tangible rewards allowed students to focus more on self-improvement than on earning incentives.

Autonomy also played a critical role in supporting self-regulation. LeBlanc (2004) reported that when students had opportunities to make choices about how they earned or spent tokens, they developed a stronger sense of ownership. "Choice increases motivation and responsibility," LeBlanc explained, "because students feel they have control over their success." Tybus (2010) reached similar conclusions, finding that "when students take part in determining rewards or reflect on their progress, they show higher levels of engagement and persistence." These findings suggested that classroom economies promoted more than compliance, they helped students practice decision-making and self-direction.

Goal setting and reflection were essential components of self-regulation within classroom economies. Heiniger et al. (2022) found that when students reviewed their weekly earnings and set new goals, "they demonstrated improved organization and persistence." Likewise, Salmon (2015) highlighted that classroom economies allowed students to "see tangible evidence of progress while learning to take ownership of their effort." These opportunities for goal-directed reflection reinforced metacognitive skills, enabling students to monitor their performance and adapt strategies for improvement. Over time, students learned to value the process of learning itself rather than the rewards associated with it.

The shift from external reinforcement to internal regulation represented one of the most significant developmental outcomes of classroom economies. Scott (1998) described this shift as "a process of fading support that strengthens independent behavior" (p. XX). When teachers implemented reflection journals, peer feedback, or self-assessment forms, students began to view accountability as self-driven rather than teacher directed. Heiniger et al. (2022) concluded that this transition marked the moment when reinforcement became learning, when motivation transformed into self-discipline.

Researchers agreed that the goal of a classroom economy was not to manage students indefinitely but to equip them with the self-regulatory skills necessary for lifelong learning (Heiniger et al., 2022) (LeBlanc, 2004) (Scott, 1998) (Tybus, 2010). Through this developmental process, classroom economies transformed external systems of reward into internal systems of self-control and purpose.

Self-Regulation and Homework Completion

Rademacher (1998) emphasized that homework has been a controversial topic over the years. Homework completion has long been viewed as both an academic expectation and an indicator of students' ability to self-regulate their learning behaviors. Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) described homework as "an authentic context in which students practice goal setting, time management, and self-monitoring." When students completed homework regularly, they demonstrated planning, persistence, and responsibilityskills that closely align with the self-regulation cycle of forethought, performance, and reflection. In this way, reinforcement systems that cultivated self-regulation within the classroom also helped students sustain these behaviors outside of school hours.

Scott (1998) argued that as reinforcement faded in the classroom, students became increasingly capable of maintaining productive behaviors on their own. Students continued to meet expectations when reinforcement was withdrawn due to the presence of self-management that replaced an external reward or token (Scott, 1998). Heiniger et al. (2022) reached similar conclusions, finding that students who practiced self-tracking within classroom economies showed stronger organization and persistence in completing assignments at home. They noted that “reflection and record keeping extended accountability beyond the classroom.” These findings suggested that self-regulation strategies learned through classroom economies directly supported consistent homework completion.

Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) emphasized that homework provided opportunities for students to apply the metacognitive skills fostered in the classroom. Students who had internalized reinforcement systems were better able to plan when to work, monitor their progress, and evaluate their results. Theodore et al. (2009) tested this connection through a class wide reinforcement intervention aimed at improving homework submission rates in a fourth-grade classroom. After implementing the system, completion rates rose from below 60 percent to nearly 100 percent. The improvement was attributed to “the clear expectations and consistent feedback that reinforcement provided.” Their findings confirmed that reinforcement structures could strengthen both behavioral follow-through and academic responsibility.

Smith et al. (2022) provided additional insight into how reward systems regulate classroom functioning, noting that “predictable feedback helps students understand expectations and manage their effort across tasks.” When such systems were paired with opportunities for self-reflection, students began to connect their classroom habits to home routines. Kim et al. (2022) found that “external incentives can encourage sustained effort if students perceive them as

support for competence rather than control." This perception helped students carry intrinsic motivation from the classroom to independent study settings, which improved homework consistency and quality.

The relationship between self-regulation and homework completion also reflected the gradual shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Tan et al. (2022) explained that "positive reinforcement encourages autonomy because students experience success as a direct result of their choices." As reinforcement was withdrawn, students continued to complete assignments because they valued mastery and achievement rather than external rewards. Heiniger et al. (2022) noted that "self-monitoring and reflection transformed reinforcement from an external system into an internal habit of accountability." The evidence suggested that the connection between self-regulation and homework completion represented not just a behavioral improvement but a developmental outcome.

Synthesis and Implications

Across the literature, a clear relationship emerged between reinforcement, motivation, and self-regulation. Early research established that reinforcement increased desired behaviors when applied consistently and fairly (Ackerman et al., 202) (Tan et al., 2022). More recent studies expanded these findings, showing that classroom economies not only managed behavior but also fostered engagement and accountability through structured feedback (Dalal & Kusum, 2025) (Heiniger et al., 2022). Together, these studies demonstrated that classroom economies could evolve from external management systems into frameworks that promote self-directed learning.

The literature stressed the importance of intentional design and gradual fading of reinforcement. Scott (1998) found that "as reinforcement fades, students maintain appropriate

behaviors because they have learned to self-regulate." Similarly, Heiniger et al. (2022) observed that students who participated in self-tracking showed "stronger organization and independence." These findings suggested that fading reinforcement and integrating reflection helped students develop autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Equity and consistency also played vital roles in sustaining student engagement. Dalal and Kusum (2025) reported that fairness and transparency strengthened motivation, while Smith et al. (2022) noted that "reward systems provide predictable feedback that helps students understand expectations and manage effort." When reinforcement was perceived as fair and supportive, students were more likely to internalize responsibility for their actions.

Finally, researchers agreed that classroom economies had implications beyond behavior management. Heiniger et al. (2022) and Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) found that self-regulatory skills practiced in the classroom, such as goal setting, reflection, and persistence, transferred to independent learning contexts like homework. These studies reinforced that classroom economies, when thoughtfully implemented, helped students become more autonomous, motivated, and accountable learners.

To summarize, the literature revealed that classroom economies integrate behavioral and motivational theories to support student growth. Reinforcement provided the structure, reflection cultivated self-awareness, and autonomy fostered independence. When these systems are applied with fairness and purpose, they not only guided behavior but developed lifelong learning habits and self-regulation.

Conclusion

The body of research reviewed demonstrated that classroom economy systems play a significant role in helping students develop motivation, responsibility, and self-regulation.

Originally rooted in behavioral psychology, these systems have evolved into practical frameworks that connect effort and achievement through reinforcement and reflection. When implemented with consistency and fairness, classroom economies establish a predictable environment in which students understand expectations and recognize how their actions influence outcomes.

Over time, these systems become more than classroom management tools. They transform into learning structures that support autonomy and goal setting. Through opportunities to earn, save, and reflect, students learn to take ownership of their choices and behavior. As external reinforcement gradually fades, students begin to demonstrate intrinsic motivation, internal accountability, and confidence in their ability to succeed.

The literature collectively indicated that classroom economies foster habits that extend beyond the classroom. Students who participate in these systems develop perseverance, decision-making skills, and a stronger sense of responsibility toward their learning. These self-regulatory skills contribute to greater academic independence, including more consistent homework completion and improved engagement.

In summary, classroom economy systems provide teachers with a practical and meaningful way to bridge behavioral theory and student-centered learning. They empower students to connect effort with reward, and experience success through their own persistence and reflection. When implemented with purpose, classroom economies can cultivate learners who are motivated and responsible, as well as capable of managing their own behavior and academic growth.

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