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Rewards as Hidden Curriculum and Their Impact on the Moral Values of Secondary School Students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This research paper investigates the role of reward practices in schools as a hidden curriculum that influences the moral values of students in a secondary school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Although the reward system is a common practice in ensuring discipline, academic participation, and desirable behaviour, its moral consequences have not been explored extensively. Based on semi-structured interviews with ten purposely sampled male teachers in the public secondary schools, the research examines the way in which teachers perceive and practice reward practices, and the reward practices denote implicit moral expectations. Thematic analysis with the help of the thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2006), five related themes appeared: (1) dualism in rewards as a motivator and compliance mechanism; (2) moral legitimacy and pedagogical importance of non-material recognition; (3) fairness and transparency as the necessary ethical prerequisites to the implementation of rewards; (4) application of reflective pedagogy to develop intrinsic moral reasoning; and (5) contextual and cultural factors that affect the reaction of students to rewards. The results show that even though praise and symbolic recognition have the ability to strengthen prosocial behaviour, overdependence on material rewards can lead to transactional attitudes that subvert the inherent morality. The research claims that reward practices should be planned as moral indicators that are part of the hidden curriculum and not just behavioural management strategies. The paper has implications for policy change, teacher education and moral pedagogy in resource-limited educational institutions.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Rewards, Moral Values, Qualitative Research, Secondary Education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Introduction

Ethics development is one of the main educational objectives in the whole world, and its importance is especially observed in environments like Pakistan, where religious, cultural and civic values are the core of the nation and social unity. Schools not only provide a venue where academic teaching is imparted, but also form a place where youngsters foster character, interpersonal skills, and an ethical nature. Although formal curricula may map clear moral goals, e.g., honesty, respect, responsibility, and empathy, the learning of morals in students is determined just as much, and in the same manner, by the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum has its original conceptualisation by Jackson (1968) as that of lessons that are tacit, unintended and are often unarticulated in school routine, teacher-student relations, and institutional norms. The lessons have an impact on the knowledge of students in fairness, authority, justice, social expectations, and personal responsibility. The reward systems have a place of their own in this landscape. By complimenting students, delegating, recognising involvement, or even rewarding them, teachers convey

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more than just behavioural ratification; they are communicating about the values that are important as well as what types of behaviours are socially approved. According to Giroux and Penna (1979), the hidden curriculum manifests itself in power relations and institutional practices, and rewards are implicit mechanisms by which students learn how to adhere to or rebel against the dominant norms. Reward practices can have even greater moral implications in the secondary schools in Pakistan, where teachers have immense power and are regarded as moral guideposts.

The studies in the Pakistani setting imply that the behaviours that teachers may use to praise, correct, or ignore the students significantly impact the moral judgments and self-perception of the children in question (Tabassum et al., 2024). Nevertheless, in most government schools in KP, reward practices are informal, unstandardized and most of the time inconsistent. Teachers often formulate their own ways of rewarding behaviour, and when they do so, they can easily encourage conformity to moral knowledge. As an example, having memorization over originality, compliance over integrity, may send implicit messages concerning valued elements in the school culture. This could also lead to the practice of performative morality, with students acting morally out of a need to get rewards, but not out of any moralistic belief. Regardless of the relevance of these problems, not many empirical studies in the Pakistani setting have explored the role of reward practices as moral cues in the hidden curriculum. The majority of the research is concerned with general moral education, teacher behaviour, or character formation, without being much concerned with the daily micro-practices that quietly influence the thinking on ethics. This paper, therefore, aims at bridging the current serious gap by investigating: How do teachers understand school reward practices as a hidden curriculum that defines the moral values of students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? This study will help to enhance the perspective of how reward systems, both formal and informal, can facilitate the development of moralities in students by examining the lived experiences and interpretations of teachers. Findings in this particular study could be used in designing ethical reward systems, improving teacher training, and boosting moral education in the province.

Literature Review
Hidden Curriculum: Implicit Schooling

The hidden curriculum is a set of rules, expectations, patterns of relationships and behavioural signs that learners acquire at school without being taught. Such implicit messages are able to support social inequality, reflect cultural norms, or develop certain moral dispositions (Margolis, 2001). Schools are mini-societies, and students get to experience the importance of authority, justice, and responsibility in their schools, not through school lessons. Various researchers observe that the hidden curriculum can be more powerful than formal instruction. The original work of Jackson (1968) notes the influence of routines in the classroom, teacher voice, peer relationships, and institutional pressures on forming values and behaviours in the students. Giroux and Penna (1979) also argue that, unless critically analysed, the hidden curriculum processes can socialise students into conformity or obedience. The hidden curriculum in the Pakistani situation is influenced by the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students, collectivist cultural values and powerful religious forces. Respect for elders, humble behaviour and obedience are some of the behaviours that are usually reinforced implicitly by the day-to-day classroom activities. However, such implicit messages can also convey contradictory or unintentional values, depending on the way in which teachers approach their students and in which rewards or punishments are applied. 3.2 Reward Systems as Signals of Worth. In learning institutions, rewards can be used in several ways: they stimulate performance, promote positive behaviour, and are used as feedback. However, they are also moral cues, which define how students perceive value and why. It is intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. The self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000) brings out the difference between extrinsic motivation, which is driven by rewards, and intrinsic motivation, which is driven by inner commitment to values. Over-dependence on extrinsic incentives may undermine intrinsic moral reasoning because it may cause students to think about ethical principles in favour of transactional benefits. Influence of non-material/material rewards. Kohn (1993) states that material rewards like prizes or tokens tend to encourage competition, surface-level compliance or reward dependency. Non-material rewards, in their turn, praise, recognition, and leadership positions prove that the moral agency of students is justified and promote the development of identity (Wentzel, 2010). Such types of recognition can be indicative of trust, responsibility, and mutual respect, which are all staples of moral development. Ethical implications. Ethics in institutions are also expressed through reward practices. In case rewards are given out in a non-equitable and arbitrary way, the students will be taught that justice can be

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compromised or is biased. On the other hand, fair and constant reward systems have the capacity to impart fairness and accountability.

Moral Education within the Pakistani Context

The national curriculum is based on the Islamic and civic values of honesty, compassion, respect, and social responsibility in Pakistan. Nonetheless, studies demonstrate that the success of moral education lies in the behaviours and implicit practices of teachers. According to Akram et al. (2023), moral learning heavily depends on teacher modelling, relational trust, and classroom climate. Moreover, the Pakistani educators are usually overworked, have huge classes with low training, and are subject to examination pressures. As Siddiqui and Aslam (2022) note, the limitations may cause inconsistent or practical application of the rewards, at times supporting compliance instead of the process of moral reflection. Therefore, it is necessary to learn more about the way teachers conceive of reward practices to empower moral education in the country.

Methodology
Research Design

The study used a qualitative and interpretivist research design to examine the subjective attitudes and moral judgments of teachers on reward practices. The interpretivist paradigm recognises that human behaviour is influenced by the processes of meaning-making and that the process of cognising such meanings involves a thorough study of the experiences of the participants. Qualitative inquiry is hence very appropriate in exploring the hidden messages of morality embedded in the everyday school practices.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit ten secondary-school teachers in different districts in KP. The selection criteria were as follows: not less than 3 years' experience as a teacher, close participation in classroom management, participation in ethical or disciplinary action, and readiness to consider individual practices. Even though all the participants were men, this is an indication of the staffing structure of the public secondary school in KP which consists of most of the teachers who are men. The subjects covered a wide range of academic fields, with representatives of Islamic Studies, Urdu, General Science, and Social Studies represented to give better insight into the academic fields.

Data Collection

The data were gathered by semi-structured interviews that were conducted within 45-60 minutes. Questions that were asked by an interview guide were: How do you make a decision on how and when to reward students? Do you think rewards are moral message senders? If so, how?" What are the ethical issues with the provision or non-provision of rewards? How do students react to various rewards? Interviews were done in Urdu, Pashto or English, depending on the choice of the participants. The interviews were transcribed and audio-taped. Tone, pauses, and emotional expressions were a few things that were captured as part of contextual observations in field notes.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted using the six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006).

1. **Familiarisation:** Multiple readings of transcripts; first notes.
2. **Coding:** Line-by-line codes are generated in a systematic manner.
3. **Theme Development:** Categorising the codes into initial themes.
4. **Review:** Themes should be compared with the dataset to guarantee that they are coherent.
5. **Definition:** theme-refining and theme-naming.
6. **Reporting:** Themifying the story. Two qualitative experts were consulted to make the researcher more credible. Participants were subjected to member checking in order to check interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Wah had to give ethical clearance. The study participants were given information about their rights, guaranteed confidentiality, and pseudonyms. There was no information that was retained. The thematic analysis

identified five themes that are interrelated and display the manner in which the teachers conceptualise and implement the practice of rewards as hidden curriculum. They all represent a multifaceted interaction between teacher ideology, school ethos, and the socio-emotional requirements of the students. The extended results below provide a better understanding of the views of the participants and the moral significances that their daily practices in the classroom carry.

Motivators or Compliance Mechanisms: Rewards

It was a constant theme among teachers to assert that rewards, especially praise and encouragement in the form of verbal messages, were useful in creating desirable classroom behaviours like attentiveness, cooperation, punctuality and respect. Most teachers termed praise as a motivating power that made students feel appreciated, particularly those who never perform well in academic activities. But the interviews showed a very distinct difference in the thinking of the teachers between authentic moral learning and behavioural compliance. Although rewards were known to induce short-term positive behaviour, a number of teachers also reported that most of the students would behave in an ethical manner merely because they expected them to get rewards. One teacher remarked: Certain boys do it only because they need to be seen and appreciated. Once the reward ceases, the behaviour ceases. That is not real moral change." This feeling is one that is shared by a greater number of teachers regarding the instrumentalisation of morality- the notion that a student can commit good acts in order to receive some form of reward instead of internalising the moral beliefs. Educational practitioners realised that reward might stimulate utilitarianism unwittingly, especially within the classroom, where material rewards had been previously exploited. Some of the teachers even gave examples of students complaining or objecting when not rewarded, which may indicate a possible dependency cycle in the long run. This created a moral quandary for teachers: rewards were helpful in upholding order, but they threatened to weaken intrinsic motivation. Finally, the theme encapsulates one of the main conflicts: Do rewards serve moral growth or are they merely the means of behaviour control? Educators frequently had to move along this line, trying to raise moral significance and to consider classroom realities.

Non-material Recognition Moral Legitimacy

The general opinion was unanimous in favour of the non-material forms of rewards, such as verbal praise, written notes of gratitude, applause, symbolic certificates, additional class duties and acknowledgements during assemblies. These practices were seen as more "cleaner morally, " less likely to cause jealousy, and more in line with the moral atmosphere that teachers were trying to build. Most of the respondents emphasised that the verbal praise was a sign of respect, dignity, and relationship warmth- things that they felt were essential to the development of morality. The concept of affirming the identities of the students was also closely associated with non-material recognition. According to the teachers, delegation of leadership or responsibilities motivated students, besides relaying the message of trust and motivating them to possess moral virtues like honesty and hard work. A number of teachers made a specific comparison between non-material and material rewards: A gift will bring happiness to a child in a day, whereas appreciation will bring him confidence in the long run. He recalls that the teacher looked up at him. Non-material rewards have perceived moral legitimacy based on their symbolic worth, and not their economic worth. These recognition forms were believed by teachers to strengthen community-oriented values and not individualistic or competitive attitudes.

Fairness and Transparency as Ethical Requirement

The slogan of equity came up several times as a virtue of reward practice. Teachers stated that rewards have ethical power that is based not merely on the content of what is given but on the fairness with which it is distributed. According to them, students were highly sensitive to attitudes regarding bias or inconsistency. Three major dimensions of fairness, as determined by the teachers, are: Consistency -Rewards should be awarded according to well-defined standards of behaviour. Transparency/Criterion- Standards have to be conveyed in an open manner to ensure that the students are aware of what they are supposed to do. Equity-- All students must be given a chance of recognition, and not just high achievers. Many of the teachers observed that unjust systems of rewards might destroy student-teacher trust, put pressure on other student relationships, and cause cynicism. One teacher explained: When a student perceives that he is favoured, he will be demotivated. He believes that it is not that good behaviour matters,

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but being near the teacher matters. The teachers who are considered to bring about fairness as an ethical duty, rather than as a procedural one. Equitable usage of rewards was perceived to be an example of more general justice principles, which students would experience in society.

Nurturing Intrinsic Moral Values by Reflection

Reflective pedagogy emerged as a significant complement to reward practices. Some of the teachers made this point clear by stating that rewards alone would not bring about profound moral insight without the student having to ponder over the moral sense of what the behaviours imply. The different reflective strategies used by teachers included: discussions in class about the importance of honesty, self-reflection activities on weekly behaviour, connecting the moral teachings with the religious stories and cultural narration, and requesting the students to explain why they do good. Teachers felt that reflection would assist students in linking outside praise with inside moral thinking. As an illustration, when a child was complimented about giving found items back, teachers would help to discuss responsibility and reliability. This theme shows that teachers do not perceive rewards as autonomous mechanisms, but as points of entry into moral discourses. The use of rewards as moral reinforcement instead of behavioural tokens was made possible by reflection.

Reward Effectiveness as Affected by Context

Educators did not refute that responses of students to rewards were firmly contextual and were influenced by factors outside the classroom setting. These included:

Socioeconomic Factors: The students with troubled backgrounds tended to attach more importance to small material rewards as they were scarce at home.

Parental Expectations: There were parents who promoted competitive attitudes, which caused children to be more reward-dependent.

Exam Pressure and School Culture: The pressure to perform well in exams and the culture of the school that leaned heavily on examination performance were identified to have limited moral conversation in schools, compelling the teachers to remain pragmatic in the use of rewards.

Cultural Norms: In collectivist contexts, the recognition at the group level might enhance the sense of belonging to a group, but too much competitiveness might lead to relational friction. Such a theme shows that moral messages hidden in reward practices are not internalised in the same way, but they are construed through the prism of both personal and social realities of students.
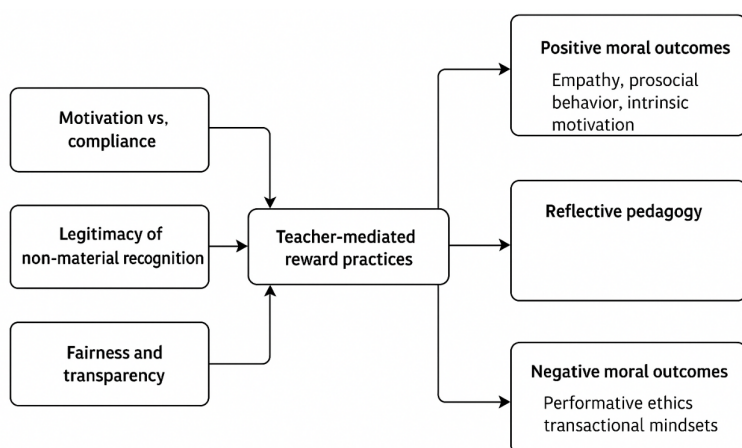
Figure 1

Figure 1 is used to show the dynamic process of how teacher-mediated reward practices are acted out as part of the hidden curriculum and influence the moral outcomes of students. This cause-map visually arranges the five thematic pathways in an interconnected relationship that converts the actions of teachers into moral outcomes.

The fundamental aspects of the model are the realisation that decisions made, the motives, and the pedagogical practices of teachers are the point of entry into the classroom moral ecology. By either formal or informal rewarding, teachers are sending ethical messages that shape the perception of students of fairness, responsibility and moral identity.

These five pathways serve as filters to interpretations:

Motivation vs. compliance: What defines whether rewards cultivate real values or short-lived behaviour.

The legitimacy of non-material: Recognition focuses on the validity of some type of praise in confirming the dignity of students.

Fairness and transparency: Equity and openness provide ethical consistency in teacher-student relationships. Moral internalisation takes place in

Reflective Pedagogy: These signals are construed within contextual and cultural influences. The combination of these pathways results in either positive moral outcomes (empathy, prosocial behaviour and intrinsic motivation) or negative moral outcomes (performative ethics and transactional mind-sets) based on the design and implementation of rewards.

Discussion

The results of this paper support the idea that reward practices are not just behavioural tools, but highly ethical actions ingrained in the hidden curriculum. In line with the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the teachers in the study were concerned that too much dependence on extrinsic rewards may destroy intrinsic moral motivation. They instead promoted non-material recognition, which justifies the identities and ethical abilities of students. Among the most important findings that the data provided have shown is that the moral potency of reward practices is not in the reward but in the way that it is carried out. Justice, transparency, and thoughtful connection to moral values will turn the rewards into the tools of control into the systems of ethical growth. It is consistent with global research, which stresses the moral agency of teachers and the relational basis of moral education (Wentzel, 2010). The identified centrality of fairness is echoed in the worldwide research on moral development. Teachers play the role of moral gatekeepers whose judgments determine perceptions of justice and trust among the students. In a situation where rewards are shared fairly and openly, there will be the instillation of values of sharing and responsibility among students. Moral disillusionment or disengagement can be experienced when rewards are not consistent among students. The context is also significant in the findings. In resource-constrained environments like KP, the socioeconomic differences determine how students perceive material and non-material rewards. The teachers are thus required to be sensitive to the background of the students when calibrating their practices, so that, besides reward programs, they do not tend to perpetuate inequalities unknowingly. In addition, the consideration of reflective pedagogy highlights the importance of dialogue and reasoning during the ethical building. The research hypothesises that reflective discussions enable students to make the shift between external reinforcement and internal moral realisation and reduce the gap between behaviour and ethics. On the whole, the findings provide an addition to the existing literature because they demonstrate that the concept of reward practices as seen through the experiences of teachers is a hidden, yet potent, means of moral socialisation. They confirm that policy-level concern is necessary on the issue of reward systems as systems of administration and not as ethical systems.

Implications for Practice

The results of this research can have a number of significant implications for educational practice, teacher education and school policies. Since reward systems are often not a direct subject of teacher training or school improvement models, they are an unnoticed aspect of moral pedagogy in the Pakistani educational environment and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in particular. The implications below illustrate an expanded use of reward practices as a deliberate tool of moral development by teachers, school leaders and policymakers.

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Non-Material, Dignity-Based Recognition Preeminence

In this research, there was a recurring theme about teachers highlighting that non-material incentives like praise, recognition, publicity, leadership and appreciation notes were more morally significant and more effective in pedagogy than material rewards. These recognition forms meet relatedness and competence psychological needs that assist students to feel respected and valued. Learning establishments ought to embrace frameworks incorporating the institutionalisation of dignity-based recognition into day-to-day practice. Examples include:

Moral Spotlight- Instances at Gatherings

Students are awarded for honesty, kindness or usefulness. A values ledger in which the teachers are recorded with acts of moral significance.

Change of Classroom Leadership Roles Based on Responsibility

These practices send the message that moral excellence is not a competition but rather a character trait and that every student, whether he excels academically or not, has the chance to achieve moral excellence.

Integrating Reflective Moral Dialogue within Reward Practices

Reflection converts a reward as a behavioural signal into moral learning. Teachers do not need to give out automatic rewards; by linking the action to a larger moral story, they can use this. For example: Questioning the students, why do you believe you did the right thing by returning the money that was lost? Association of moral behaviour with culture or religion. The promotion of peer reflection, whereby the classmates are questioned to provide their interpretations of moral acts. These reflective activities assist students to change their thinking from " I do good things because I am rewarded to " I do good things because it is right and meaningful. Reflective questioning, dialogic pedagogy, and moral reasoning modules should then be included in teacher training programs to provide educators with appropriate tools to use in encouraging ethical conversations.

Promoting Equity and Openness in the Distribution of Rewards

Equity was among the most important moral lessons that was taught using reward systems. Schools are to work out clear and common principles on: What actions should be rewarded? The way consistency between classrooms is preserved. The way the students are made aware of the criteria. Equal access to recognition by teachers. This openness works not only to facilitate fairness but also to instil ethical leadership and democracy. In the event that students observe equitable decision-making, they become informed of very important moral lessons regarding justice, equality and respect. Biased patterns should also be corrected by school leaders who would periodically discuss reward practices with teachers during teacher meetings, students during student feedback sessions, and parents during parent engagement forums.

Teacher Training Development on Ethical Classroom Management

The inquiry into the moral implications of reward practices is not clearly brought out in most teacher education programs in Pakistan. This forms a huge disparity in teacher readiness. Professional development must therefore be inclusive of: Learning about the hidden curriculum. Moral values in punishment. Avoiding reward dependency: Non-material and culturally-relevant praise. Managing classroom justice: Encouraging internal ethical principles. These competencies can be taught in resource-constrained schools by low-cost training provided by senior teachers, district education offices or by non-governmental organisations focused on moral education.

The current set of policies on rewards should be aligned with the moral goals of the school.

At the institution level, it should be: Implement reward systems in their School Behaviour Policy. Match the rewards to the mentioned moral values (e.g., honesty, respect, responsibility). Don't have piecemeal or contradictory reward programs. Periodically assess the morality of incentive packages. As an example, when a school purports to appreciate cooperation but largely rewards the position in the academic hierarchy, it sends mixed ethical messages. The

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consistency between the explicit curriculum and the hidden curriculum is achieved by aligning reward practices with moral goals.

Future Research Limitations and Future Research Recommendations.
Limitations
The present research has its merits as well as a number of limitations that limit the generalizability and application of the results of the study.

Small Sample Size and Poor Representation
In qualitative research, the sample size of ten teachers is not conducive to capturing the full breadth of the perspectives of the sampled teachers, despite the fact that qualitative research emphasises depth over breadth. In addition, the sample was chosen in one particular province and among the schools in the province, mostly in the public secondary schools. The reward culture in the institutions of higher secondary, madrassahs and private schools may be different.

Gender Imbalance
All respondents were men, which is representative of the staffing system of most of the public secondary schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Nonetheless, the experiences and moral sensibilities of female teachers might vary significantly, particularly in respect to relational pedagogy, expression of emotions, and moral communication. The lack of female voices limits the gender inclusivity of the study.

Self-Reported Data
The research is based on the self-perception of teachers that could be affected by: Social desirability bias, Selective recall, Ideal descriptions, and not practices. Observations in direct classes may give more detailed and objective information.

Student Lack of Perspectives.
Since moral learning is a relational and interpretive process, the views of the students are of major significance. Without their voices, it is unclear how students obtain, decipher and internalise the moral messages that are conveyed through rewards. 8.2 Future Research Recommendations. Future studies can add to the body of knowledge by adopting:

Mixed-Methods Designs
The qualitative interview with quantitative survey or classroom observations might be combined to get more detailed evidence concerning the functioning of reward systems.

Comparative Studies in School Types
Comparative studies in the context of public, private, and madrassah may indicate that there are structural variations in the practices of rewards and also the operation of the hidden curriculum.

Student and Parent Viewpoints to be Included
Moral development can only be understood through triangulation: Teacher intentions, Student interpretations, Parental expectations. Such a multi-perspective would give a more comprehensive moral ecology.

Longitudinal Designs
Research studies that may be conducted over a long period will investigate the impact of long-term exposure to various reward systems on the moral development of students.

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Gender-Focused Research

The gender aspect of the moral behaviours in schools could be clarified by analysing the disparities in the use of rewards by men and women teachers, or the reactions of boys and girls.

Conclusion

The results of this paper show that reward practices in schools are not disinterested behaviour management mechanisms. Instead, they are major moral cues that are entrenched in the hidden curriculum that influence the values, motivations, and ethical natures of students. In daily interactions, teachers send strong messages of what good behaviour is, what is rewarded and what is morally important. The five thematic pathways that have been revealed in the present study show that award systems have the potential to support prosocial behaviour and intrinsic moral reasoning or encourage transactional and superficial compliance. What counts is not the reward itself, but the deliberation, justice, clarity and contemplation with which rewards are given out. The issue of reward practices in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where schools, in most cases, have to cope with resource scarcity, high classes and exam-centric cultures, makes the reward practices even more significant as the unobtrusive agents of moral meaning. The fact that teachers are able to negotiate these complexities underscores their key contribution to the classroom ethical fabric. Finally, this research notes the importance of schools considering reward systems as intentional aspects of moral education. Through the integration of rewards with the ethical objective, the integration of reflective pedagogy and by correcting imbalances in administering rewards, schools can raise students who do not act because they are seeking to receive awards, but rather because they know and care about the ethical basis of the action they perform.

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