

Behaviorism as a Pedagogical Framework with Implications for K–12 Education

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Abstract

This study examines Behaviorism as a pedagogical framework and analyzes its implications for K–12 education within the Chilean educational context. Behaviorism, grounded in stimulus-response mechanisms and reinforcement-based learning, conceptualizes learning as a measurable change in behavior influenced by environmental stimuli. As a structured and outcomes-oriented approach, Behaviorism offers pedagogical strategies that prioritize the acquisition of target behaviors through repetition, reinforcement schedules, and externally regulated instruction. These characteristics align with key performance demands within Chile's national education system, which has increasingly emphasized academic accountability, standardization, and measurable learning outcomes. The paper critically examines how behaviorist methodologies can be applied in Chilean classrooms to enhance instructional effectiveness, classroom management, and student performance. Practical applications, including reinforcement techniques, behavioral objectives, task analysis, and feedback systems, are examined in Chile's K–12 instructional design models. Moreover, the integration of behaviorist practices into teacher training programs and assessment protocols is evaluated for its potential to promote consistency and pedagogical efficiency. While the model offers significant advantages in terms of structure, control, and predictability, the analysis also addresses its epistemological and pedagogical limitations, particularly the risk of undermining student autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking. The study emphasizes the need to balance behaviorist techniques with constructivist and humanistic principles to accommodate learners' diverse cognitive and affective needs. The findings support the proposition that Behaviorism, when contextualized and implemented with pedagogical sensitivity, can contribute meaningfully to Chile's K–12 educational development, particularly in settings that demand behavioral clarity, procedural fidelity, and instructional standardization.

Keywords: *Behaviorism, Chile, Chile's K–12 instructional design models, Chilean classroom, Pedagogy, Student performance, Classroom management*

1. Introduction

Education is a dynamic process that encompasses the transmission of knowledge, the cultivation of values, and the development of skills necessary for personal and societal

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advancement. Across diverse educational systems, philosophical perspectives influence the design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction. One such perspective is Behaviorism, a learning theory that emphasizes observable and measurable aspects of student behavior as indicators of learning. It asserts that learning occurs through interaction with the environment, primarily shaped by reinforcement and repetition. While often associated with traditional forms of instruction, Behaviorism continues to influence contemporary educational practice, particularly in areas where structure, control, and accountability are prioritized [1]. In the field of pedagogy, Behaviorism provides a framework for understanding how external stimuli—such as rewards, punishments, and reinforcements—can be used to condition student responses and shape desirable behaviors. Its applications range from classroom management and task sequencing to assessment design and curriculum implementation. Despite the rise of constructivist and student-centered approaches, behaviorist principles retain practical value, especially in foundational skill acquisition and behavior regulation [2].

Furthermore, its systematic and data-driven orientation appeals to educational policymakers and administrators seeking measurable improvements in learning outcomes. The relevance of Behaviorism is particularly significant within the context of K–12 education in Chile, where educational reforms over the past two decades have focused on increasing equity, improving learning quality, and strengthening institutional accountability [3]. Chile's education system, comprising public, private, and subsidized schools, has been characterized by persistent disparities in access, quality, and student performance [4]. In response, national strategies have emphasized performance standards, instructional efficiency, and behavioral consistency, often at the expense of individualized and creative pedagogies. Given this policy environment, Behaviorism offers a pedagogical model aligned with systemic goals of standardization, order, and outcome-based assessment. Behaviorist strategies such as structured lesson planning, immediate feedback, and positive reinforcement can improve student motivation, reduce disruptive behavior, and support academic achievement in Chilean classrooms, particularly in underserved areas where resources and teacher training are limited. However, the model also presents challenges, including its limited attention to cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural dimensions of learning. These concerns necessitate a critical and context-sensitive examination of its applicability.

This study aims to investigate the potential of Behaviorism as a pedagogical framework for Chile's K–12 education system, analyzing both its practical advantages and theoretical limitations. The central argument is that Behaviorism, when implemented with contextual sensitivity and pedagogical balance, can enhance instructional consistency, behavioral regulation, and academic performance in Chilean schools, particularly when combined with complementary educational approaches that address students' diverse learning needs.

2. Theoretical framework

Behaviorism, as a foundational learning theory, conceptualizes learning as a process of observable and measurable behavioral change. This perspective emphasizes the role of the environment in shaping behavior, positing that internal cognitive states are less critical than external stimuli and responses in explaining how individuals acquire knowledge and skills. Behaviorist theory rests on the assumption that all behaviors are learned through interaction with the environment, primarily via conditioning mechanisms—classical and operant [5]. Classical conditioning involves forming associations between stimuli and reflexive responses. In contrast, operant conditioning, more prominent in educational contexts, relies on reinforcement and punishment to increase or decrease the likelihood of specific behaviors [6].

In academic practice, Behaviorism provides a framework for designing systematic instruction, managing classroom behavior, and evaluating student performance. It supports techniques such as direct instruction, task analysis, programmed learning, reinforcement schedules, and immediate corrective feedback—strategies that promote clear learning objectives, efficient skill acquisition, and structured student responses [7][8]. These techniques align well with educational environments that prioritize predictability, discipline, and accountability, providing teachers with a toolkit for maintaining classroom order and tracking student progress through observable outcomes [9].

Recent research underscores the enduring relevance of Behaviorism across early childhood education, special education, language learning, and behavior management. These domains often require structured reinforcement systems and explicit instructional guidance, particularly in settings where students face developmental, behavioral, or socio-economic challenges [10][11]. Behaviorist strategies are often embedded in classroom systems such as token economies, behavior charts, and drill-based instruction, which reinforce desired behaviors and discourage disruptive conduct. In the Chilean context, the application of Behaviorist principles is particularly salient in public and subsidized educational institutions. Chile's K–12 education system is characterized by significant performance disparities and a policy emphasis on standardization and assessment-based accountability [12]. In response to these challenges, behaviorist-aligned strategies have been promoted as part of instructional reforms to enhance consistency in teaching practices, ensure curriculum coverage, and improve student performance in national assessments [13]. These reforms emphasize goal-oriented instruction and measurable learning outcomes, both of which are key principles in behaviorist pedagogy.

Furthermore, Chile's education sector has increasingly focused on inclusive education, where behaviorist methods are frequently used to support students with learning or behavioral difficulties. In such cases, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and functional behavior assessments are tools often used by teachers and specialists to develop individualized intervention plans that address disruptive or off-task behaviors [11]. These approaches offer empirically validated procedures for shaping adaptive behaviors in classrooms where diverse learner needs must be addressed within the constraints of standardized curriculum delivery.

However, the limitations of Behaviorism must also be critically acknowledged. The theory has been criticized for its reductionist view of learning, which tends to ignore the affective, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of human development [14]. Strict reliance on external reinforcement may inadvertently suppress creativity, critical thinking, and intrinsic motivation—qualities essential for preparing students for complex, real-world challenges. In this regard, some scholars advocate for an integrative approach that combines Behaviorism's structured techniques with the more holistic orientations of Constructivism or Humanism [15][16].

This theoretical framework supports the position that while Behaviorism may not fully account for the complexity of learning, it remains a valuable and effective model when applied in context-sensitive ways. In Chile's K–12 educational landscape—where structure, efficiency, and accountability are prioritized—Behaviorist strategies can provide essential scaffolding for both instructional consistency and behavioral regulation. However, their implementation should be complemented with strategies that promote deeper cognitive engagement, emotional development, and learner autonomy.

3. Behaviorism in practice in Chilean classrooms

The practical application of Behaviorist principles in Chilean classrooms is evident in instructional routines, behavior management systems, and assessment strategies, particularly in public and subsidized schools where standardized practices and performance-based accountability are emphasized. Chile’s national education framework has, in recent decades, encouraged the adoption of structured pedagogical methods that align with Behaviorist principles, such as clear learning objectives, repetition of content, and reinforcement-based behavior management. In instructional design, Chilean teachers frequently employ direct instruction—a method that reflects core Behaviorist strategies. Lessons are often structured into sequential tasks, with an emphasis on drill-and-practice routines and mastery of content before advancing to the next level. This approach facilitates the acquisition of procedural knowledge and reinforces correct responses through immediate feedback and correction. A study by Benítez and Guerra highlighted that such methods are prevalent in early primary education, where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are reinforced through repeated practice and extrinsic motivation systems [10].

In terms of classroom management, many Chilean schools utilize token economies, behavior charts, and structured reward systems to shape student behavior. These tools, rooted in operant conditioning, allow teachers to reinforce compliance with classroom rules and academic engagement. In inclusive and special education settings, behaviorist strategies are also prevalent. Teachers utilize functional behavior assessments and positive behavioral interventions to manage students who exhibit behavioral or emotional difficulties. Soto and Ponce reported that behavior modification programs using tangible reinforcements and task breakdowns had positive outcomes for students with conduct disorders, increasing their engagement and reducing classroom disruptions [11].

Moreover, behaviorist practices are evident in assessment policies, where students are frequently evaluated through standardized tests, checklists, and performance rubrics that emphasize objective and measurable criteria. These assessments mirror the behaviorist emphasis on observable outcomes and mastery-based progression. According to Álvarez, this approach is strongly embedded in Chile’s national curriculum, especially in schools subjected to external performance evaluations [12].

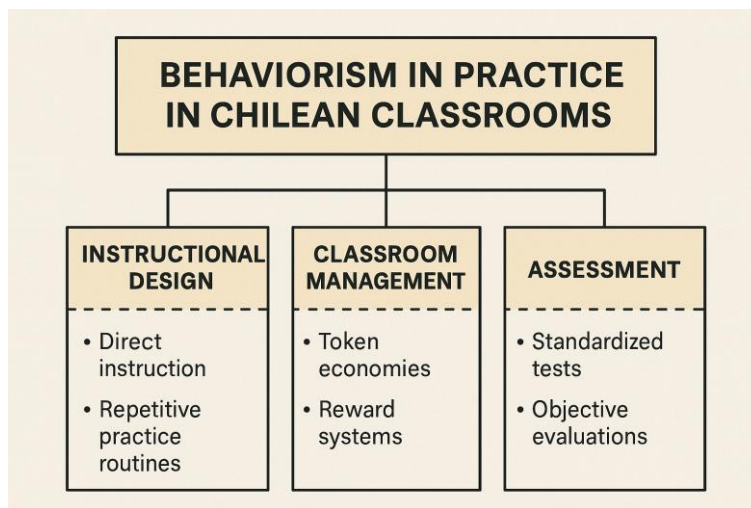


Figure 1. Behaviorism in practice in Chilean classrooms

Figure 1 illustrates the application of behaviorist principles across three key domains in Chilean K–12 education: instructional design, classroom management, and assessment. It highlights common strategies such as direct instruction, token economies, and standardized evaluations, which reflect Behaviorism's emphasis on structured, measurable, and reinforcement-based teaching practices. While these practices align with policy goals of efficiency and equity, challenges arise when behaviorist strategies are applied rigidly. Overreliance on external reinforcement can diminish student autonomy and reduce intrinsic motivation, particularly among older students who may seek more meaningful, self-directed learning experiences. Additionally, the emphasis on control and compliance may conflict with the needs of culturally diverse learners, inhibiting their creative or critical thinking. Despite these limitations, Behaviorism remains a practical and widely used framework in Chilean classrooms. Its techniques offer scalable, consistent strategies that are particularly effective in settings where teachers face large class sizes, resource constraints, or students with complex learning needs. When applied thoughtfully and supplemented with student-centered methods, Behaviorist practices can contribute positively to the overall functioning and performance of K–12 classrooms in Chile.

4. Implications for K–12 education in Chile

The integration of Behaviorism into Chilean K–12 education offers both strategic opportunities and notable limitations. Its emphasis on observable behavior, external reinforcement, and structured learning environments aligns well with national educational priorities centered on performance metrics, standardized instruction, and behavioral regulation. This alignment makes Behaviorism particularly attractive to policymakers and educators seeking scalable, systematized approaches to improve educational outcomes across diverse school contexts. One of the primary advantages of applying Behaviorism in Chilean classrooms is its potential to enhance instructional consistency and procedural fidelity. In resource-constrained schools, particularly those serving marginalized communities, behaviorist techniques such as direct instruction, task segmentation, and reinforcement schedules provide teachers with clear, actionable methods to manage large class sizes, ensure curriculum coverage, and promote student engagement. These strategies are especially effective in supporting the development of foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and classroom behavior, where mastery learning and repetition are essential for student progress.

Additionally, the model supports standardizing teaching practices across Chile's fragmented education system, contributing to greater equity in instruction. Reinforcement-based systems can also reduce classroom disruptions and foster predictable learning environments, which benefit students with behavioral, emotional, or cognitive challenges. In inclusive education settings, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) are widely used to structure interventions that improve individual student outcomes. However, the application of Behaviorism must also be approached with caution. One of the critical limitations of a strictly behaviorist approach is its tendency to reduce learning to externally controlled behaviors, often neglecting the cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural dimensions of education. Overreliance on extrinsic rewards may lead to a decline in intrinsic motivation, with students focusing on compliance rather than curiosity or critical engagement. This is particularly problematic in secondary education, where learners are expected to develop autonomy, creativity, and higher-order thinking.

Furthermore, behaviorist methods may not sufficiently address culturally responsive pedagogy, which is increasingly important in diverse Chilean classrooms. The emphasis on

uniformity and compliance can conflict with pedagogical approaches that value student voice, differentiated learning, and socio-emotional development. To mitigate these limitations, educational leaders in Chile should consider integrative models that balance the structure of Behaviorism with the flexibility and student-centeredness of Constructivism or Humanism. Teachers can, for example, use reinforcement systems alongside inquiry-based learning strategies or embed behavioral objectives within collaborative, project-based tasks. Professional development should also include training on when and how to adapt behaviorist strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners.

In summary, Behaviorism holds substantial value as a pedagogical tool for Chilean K–12 education, particularly in environments that demand structure, efficiency, and measurable progress. However, its application must be context-sensitive and pedagogically balanced to ensure that it supports—not constrains—students' holistic development. When combined with reflective teaching practices and inclusive methodologies, Behaviorism can enhance instruction's effectiveness while advancing the broader goals of equity, engagement, and lifelong learning in Chile's educational system.

5. Curriculum and assessment views

The influence of Behaviorism in Chile's K–12 education extends beyond instructional methods to the design of curriculum and assessment systems. The behaviorist emphasis on observable and measurable outcomes has shaped how learning objectives are structured, how content is delivered, and how student progress is evaluated. This section explores both the curricular orientation and assessment practices influenced by Behaviorism, with a focus on national trends in Chilean public education.

5.1. Curriculum alignment with behaviorist principles

In behaviorist-informed curricula, learning is often organized into discrete, sequential units of knowledge and skills. This structure supports the idea that complex behaviors can be broken down into smaller, teachable components, enabling task analysis and the development of hierarchical learning objectives. Chile's national curriculum, especially in primary education, reflects this model through:

- Clearly defined learning outcomes for each subject and grade level.
- Emphasis on repetition, mastery, and feedback.
- Alignment with performance standards and national testing benchmarks.

Behaviorist alignment in the Chilean curriculum is particularly evident in subjects such as Mathematics, Language, and Natural Sciences, where mastery of procedures and factual recall are emphasized over open-ended exploration. Learning objectives are framed using action-oriented verbs (e.g., "identify," "solve," "complete"), consistent with behaviorist principles of specifying measurable outcomes.

While this structure provides clarity and consistency, it may limit opportunities for creativity, interdisciplinary learning, and student agency—areas typically encouraged by constructivist or inquiry-based curricula.

5.2. Assessment systems and reinforcement

Chilean assessment policies reflect a strong influence of Behaviorism, particularly in their reliance on external evaluation, scoring rubrics, and high-stakes testing. Formative and summative assessments are frequently designed to evaluate:

- Behavioral compliance (e.g., following instructions).
- Repetitive practice and correct responses.
- Standardized knowledge outcomes.

Table 1 compares behaviorist-aligned assessment practices with more student-centered alternatives, highlighting both advantages and limitations:

Table 1. Comparative views on assessment in Chilean K–12 classrooms

Dimension	Behaviorist-Aligned Assessment	Student-Centered Alternative
Assessment Type	Standardized tests, checklists, and timed drills	Portfolios, self-assessments, and project-based tasks
Feedback Mechanism	Immediate correction and reinforcement	Reflective feedback and peer evaluation
Learning Focus	Observable outcomes, right/wrong answers	Deep understanding, process-oriented skills
Motivation Approach	Extrinsic rewards (grades, praise)	Intrinsic motivation, autonomy-supportive practices
Teacher Role	Evaluator and behavior shaper	Facilitator and learning guide
Student Role	Passive responder to tasks and instructions	Active participant in knowledge construction

In Chile, high-stakes national assessments such as the SIMCE (Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación) exemplify the influence of behaviorism. These tests focus heavily on quantifiable academic performance and are often tied to school-level accountability measures. According to Álvarez (2021), the pressure to improve SIMCE scores can lead to "teaching to the test," reinforcing rote learning and limiting broader educational goals such as civic engagement or creativity. Nonetheless, the Chilean Ministry of Education is currently undertaking efforts to integrate formative and process-oriented assessments, particularly in the newer curriculum reforms. These include diagnostic evaluations and school-based evaluations that attempt to combine quantitative and qualitative data to inform instruction more holistically.

In conclusion, the behaviorist perspective has strongly influenced both the design of the national curriculum and the dominant assessment culture in Chilean K–12 education. While this has led to improvements in standardization and instructional alignment, there is growing recognition of the need for more flexible, student-centered approaches that support deeper learning and diverse forms of assessment.

6. Classroom environment and management

Behaviorism significantly influences the structure of classroom environments and the management of student behavior in Chilean K–12 schools. Emphasizing external control and environmental stimuli, Behaviorist strategies foster predictable, orderly classrooms that reinforce desirable behaviors and minimize disruptions. These approaches are particularly common in public and subsidized schools that operate under national accountability standards and often face challenges such as large class sizes, diverse student needs, and limited instructional resources.

6.1. Structuring the learning environment

From a behaviorist perspective, the classroom environment should minimize distractions and promote stimulus control—conditions where specific cues (e.g., schedules, visual aids,

seating arrangements) trigger appropriate student responses. Chilean classrooms influenced by Behaviorism often exhibit the following characteristics:

- Highly organized layouts, with designated areas for materials, group work, and individual tasks.
- Visual behavioral cues, such as rule posters, behavior charts, or daily routines.
- Teacher-directed interactions occur when the educator serves as the primary authority figure and reinforces behavior.

Such environments are designed to promote on-task behavior, compliance, and efficiency in lesson delivery. These characteristics support behaviorist goals of reinforcement, consistency, and external motivation.

6.2. Behavior management systems

Behavior management under Behaviorism involves identifying target behaviors, establishing reinforcement systems, and consistently applying consequences. Chilean teachers, especially in early grades, frequently use:

- Token economies (e.g., points, stickers, or class currency).
- Behavior charts with color-coded sections to track individual behavior.
- Immediate praise or redirection to shape behavior moment by moment.

These systems aim to condition students to follow rules and complete tasks through structured routines and reinforcement schedules. According to Soto and Ponce (2019), such strategies are widely applied in special education settings to reduce impulsivity and improve behavioral self-regulation.

Table 2 contrasts behaviorist management practices with more humanistic or constructivist alternatives:

Table 2. Comparative approaches to classroom environment and management

Aspect	Behaviorist Approach	Alternative Approach
Environmental Setup	Structured, stimulus-controlled, teacher-centered	Flexible, learner-centered, collaborative
Behavior Regulation	External reinforcement (rewards/punishments)	Self-regulation and intrinsic motivation
Teacher’s Role	Manager and enforcer of expected behaviors	Facilitator and mediator of social-emotional learning
Student’s Role	Compliant learner responding to cues	Active participant with responsibility for behavior
Behavior Tools	Token systems, behavior charts, and scheduled routines	Peer mediation, restorative circles, and social contracts
Response to Misbehavior	Immediate correction, loss of privilege, time-outs	Reflection, dialogue, and conflict resolution

While these strategies provide structure and clarity, they also raise concerns about limiting student autonomy and overemphasizing compliance. Relying heavily on external control can hinder students' opportunities to develop emotional intelligence, empathy, and intrinsic motivation. In diverse Chilean classrooms—particularly in urban or multicultural contexts—rigid management systems may be less effective and could alienate learners who thrive in collaborative or expressive environments. To address these issues, some Chilean schools are exploring hybrid behavior management models that blend reinforcement strategies with social-emotional learning (SEL), reflective practices, and student voice initiatives. These

approaches aim to maintain the classroom order promoted by Behaviorism while fostering democratic participation and a supportive learning climate.

In conclusion, Behaviorism has provided Chilean educators with practical tools to create well-regulated classroom environments that support learning and minimize disruption. However, for these systems to truly serve all students, they must evolve to accommodate more inclusive, culturally responsive, and emotionally intelligent approaches to classroom management.

7. Teacher training and policy recommendations

For Behaviorism to be applied effectively and ethically in Chilean K–12 education, it must be supported by targeted teacher training and informed by evidence-based policy. While Behaviorist strategies can offer structure and predictability in instructional delivery and classroom management, their successful implementation depends on educators' ability to apply them contextually, flexibly, and with pedagogical sensitivity.

7.1. Teacher training and professional development

Chilean teachers often receive general pedagogical training with a limited focus on learning theories as practical tools for differentiated instruction or behavioral intervention. Integrating Behaviorism into professional development programs requires more than presenting it as a historical theory—it must be reframed as a practical framework with specific applications for:

- Designing measurable learning objectives.
- Managing student behavior using reinforcement systems.
- Implementing task analysis and scaffolding techniques.
- Conducting functional behavior assessments (especially in inclusive settings).

Pre-service teacher education programs should incorporate modules on applied behavior analysis (ABA), classroom reinforcement models, and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) tailored to Chilean classrooms. These modules should also address the ethical considerations of reinforcement systems, such as avoiding over-reliance on extrinsic rewards or punishment and maintaining student dignity and autonomy.

In-service training should provide practicing teachers with case-based workshops, classroom simulations, and opportunities for peer coaching. These professional development models can help educators adapt Behaviorist techniques to diverse classroom realities, including high-needs urban schools, rural settings, and multicultural environments.

7.2. Policy recommendations

At the policy level, the Chilean Ministry of Education and school leadership must ensure that the use of behaviorist strategies aligns with broader educational goals, including equity, inclusion, and student well-being. The following recommendations are proposed:

- a. Develop national guidelines on the ethical use of reinforcement systems in public schools, ensuring that behaviorist strategies do not lead to student stigmatization or excessive compliance-oriented instruction.
- b. Integrate behaviorist-informed frameworks into school improvement plans, particularly in underperforming schools, while balancing them with humanistic and constructivist elements that promote critical thinking and emotional development.

- c. Support research-practice partnerships between universities, training institutes, and schools to study the long-term impact of behaviorist practices on student learning and motivation in diverse Chilean contexts.
- d. Include Behaviorism in inclusive education policy, especially for students with behavioral or learning challenges, by promoting evidence-based interventions such as ABA and PBIS within the public school system.
- e. Promote interdisciplinary training for school psychologists, administrators, and special education professionals in behaviorist theory and application, ensuring consistency across instruction, intervention, and school culture.

In summary, integrating Behaviorism into Chilean K–12 education requires intentional training, reflective practice, and a supportive policy environment. When Behaviorist strategies are taught and applied in pedagogically sound ways—complemented by alternative frameworks—they can contribute to more effective, inclusive, and responsive classroom practices that align with Chile’s broader educational goals.

8. Conclusion

This paper explored Behaviorism as a pedagogical framework within the context of Chilean K–12 education, analyzing its theoretical foundations, practical applications, and systemic implications. Rooted in the belief that learning results from environmental stimuli and reinforcement, Behaviorism provides structured methods for teaching, behavior management, and assessment. Its emphasis on observable outcomes and instructional control aligns closely with Chile's policy priorities of standardization, academic accountability, and improved classroom efficiency. Through the theoretical framework and practice-oriented discussions, this study illustrated how Behaviorism manifests in Chilean classrooms, most notably through direct instruction, token economies, and performance-based assessment models. These techniques are widely used to promote on-task behavior, support foundational skills, and maintain order, particularly in public schools and those with limited resources. Furthermore, behaviorist strategies have proven useful in inclusive education settings, where clearly defined behavioral goals and reinforcement systems aid students with special needs.

However, the paper also critically addressed the limitations of Behaviorism, including its reductionist view of learning, risk of over-reliance on extrinsic motivation, and incompatibility with culturally responsive and student-centered pedagogies. These limitations underscore the importance of integrating Behaviorism with complementary approaches that prioritize cognitive, emotional, and social development. The sections on curriculum, assessment, and classroom management further emphasized the systemic influence of Behaviorism in Chilean education, identifying areas where instructional practices could benefit from greater balance and innovation. In response, recommendations were offered for teacher training and policy design to ensure that behaviorist strategies are applied ethically and effectively.

In conclusion, Behaviorism remains a relevant and robust pedagogical model when applied with contextual sensitivity. Its structured, measurable, and reinforcement-based techniques can enhance teaching and learning in Chile's K–12 system, particularly when used as part of a broader, integrated instructional philosophy. As Chile continues to pursue educational equity and quality, the strategic and informed application of behaviorist principles, supported by ongoing professional development and inclusive policy, will be essential to meeting the evolving needs of learners.

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