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Praise and Reward

by Bethany Ester

(Honors Education 1100)

James Boswell stated that, “The applause of a single human being is of great consequence” (Lavoie p. 132)¹. The applause of a teacher in a classroom can have great consequences in a student’s life. While the aim of praise and reward is for the good, there are often negative aspects along with the positive aspects. As a result, there are many ramifications such as, manipulation, killing a student’s intrinsic motivation, rupturing relationships, punishment, and not fixing the underlying problem. In order to harness the positives consequences, praise and rewards must be used in the proper way. Praise and rewards sound as though only positive results could occur, but a closer look reveals many disadvantages that follow in the wake of praises and rewards.

The aim of praise and reward is to enhance performance, promote appropriate behavior or positive values, and help the individual feel good about themselves (Kohn 1993, p. 97). Praise and reward enhances performance in learning and achievement by giving positive comments on a student’s work. Praise and reward can promote appropriate behavior or positive values by offering a reward when the desired behavior or value is demonstrated. Praise and reward make the student feel good about themselves because the goal which was aimed for was reached. The result of satisfaction is an additional reward to the marketable one (Kohn, 1999, pp. 121-122). Although the overall aim of praise and reward is for the benefit of a child, praise and reward are not always positive.

Praise and reward can be a negative element in a classroom. The first question that should be asked is how do you determine who deserves a reward? A teacher cannot hand out a reward to their favorite students, they must remain objective and fair. Should it be based on effort? What if the effort results in failure, should it then be based on success? What are the standards for success (Kohn, 1993, p.21)? These questions make the process of giving rewards difficult. To make things more difficult, rewards can only last as long as the supply is available and both praise and reward are only effective when the desire exists. As a result of praise and reward only working for those students who are dependent and needy, there may be some students who are unmotivated by rewards. Also, something cannot be bought by praise and reward (Kohn, 1998, p. 20). The goal of rewards is to reinforce a behavior, and most behaviors that are desired for reinforcement are behaviors desired for a lifetime. When the rewards run out a student will prefer to continue to do little work as possible (Kohn, 1993, p. 63). Another negative element of praise is that teachers are more comfortable working with those students that are successful. As a result, high achievers receive more praise and less criticism than low achievers (Brophy, Good p. 331). In our world we have come believe that rewards are distributed fairly, which leads people to believe that they receive the reward they earned. This idea can lead to ideas such as, “one group of children, after watching a film about the Nazis, were reported to have said, ‘But the Jews must have been guilty or they wouldn’t have been punished like that’”(Kohn, 1993, p. 337). This idea can farther separate the low achievers from the high achievers. Praise and reward must be given with special care to ensure it does not have a negative influence.

On the contrary, praise and reward can positively reinforce actions and give recognition to a student. It communicates to a student the teacher’s interest and attention to his work. Praise and reward can enrich a student’s motivation and effort. When the teacher praises a student’s effort, the response is that the student will try harder and focus on learning and not so much on the answer. This reinforces the student’s desire to learn, which is important for a student to maintain throughout his

educational career. In addition to reinforcement, students need recognition. Praise from significant adults will boost self-esteem and motivation (Lavoie p. 118). One kind of recognition is concrete rewards. Concrete rewards are rewards “by which we share our sense of caring for students”, it can be a “spontaneous treat”. It is not buying affection but a way of showing affection (Wlodkowski p. 40). Praise and rewards can reap many benefits if used in the proper way, but when it is not used well it can produce many negative repercussions.

Praise and reward can be used as manipulation. Although rewards cannot affect who a person is or what he believes, rewards can change behavior (Kohn, 1993, p. 37). Manipulation is when a person controls or influences a person cleverly, or unfairly. A teacher can use rewards to change a student’s disruptive behavior and even manipulate a student to do other actions, it’s “control through seduction rather than force” (Kohn, 1993, p. 27). By offering Johnny a sticker for doing his homework, the teacher uses Johnny’s desire for a sticker to compel him to complete his homework. When rewards are viewed in this way the question that is raised is who really benefits from rewards, teachers or students? Teachers use rewards and praise to get students to sit still and quietly (Kohn, 1993, p. 29). Through this, teachers gain power as they achieve their desired goal through rewards. This power is potent and too good to pass up. Soon, this tantalizing power embeds itself into all aspects of a teacher’s curriculum, motivating students to do homework and to behave as the teacher sees fit. Rewards can turn into a manipulative tool instead of rewarding a job well done. As rewards manipulate a student it can have an affect on the student’s motivation.

Rewards can kill intrinsic motivation. “Intrinsic motivation is the drive that comes from within; students do something for the sheer joy of doing it or because they want to discover something, answer a question, or experience the feeling of self-accomplishment” (Tleson p. 3). The opposite of intrinsic motivation is extrinsic motivation, which is what praise and rewards are, “it is the desire to do something because of the promise of or hope for a tangible result” (Tleson p. 4). Rewards offer a reason for doing an activity. It is no longer to learn and develop the mind for the joy of learning, but rather to get a sticker or candy (Kohn, 1993, p. 36). Additionally, performance is changed through rewards. Rewards can hinder performance because it “signals low ability, makes people feel pressured, invites a low-risk strategy to avoid failure, and reduces interest in the task itself” (Kohn, 1993, p. 101). These hindrances can cause a student’s attitude toward activities to sour, causing mediocre work in connection to a lack of motivation (Kohn, 1993, p. 36). Once rewards run out or are no longer offered, students prefer to continue to do as little work as possible as a result of the death of intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1993, p. 63). Intrinsic motivation involves the element of risk taking to learn new information and rewards discourage risk taking. The bigger the reward offered, the easier the task a student chooses to increase the chance of success. Rewards are “enemies of exploration” (Kohn, 1993, p. 63). Furthermore, by giving a child a reward, teachers assume that a child will not complete the task without a reward (Kohn, 1993, p. 29). Although this may not be true, the student may receive this message. Thus, the student’s attitude toward learning is soured. Once a student’s attitude toward learning has changed then extrinsic motivation has overtaken intrinsic motivation.

Praise and reward rupture relationships between the teacher and student and amongst students. A relationship between a teacher and student should consist of respect for the student as an individual, listening to what the student has to say, and avoiding malicious criticism among other similar characteristics (Brophy, Good p. 1). These characteristics can be altered through praise and reward. Teachers obtain power through praise and reward because of the persuasive nature of praises and rewards. As teachers become wrapped up in this power, students can be viewed as rats in a behavior experiment, for whom the researcher feels no emotion (Lavoie p. 211). If a teacher has no feelings for their students then how can their praise be sincere and their rewards be genuine? When students are guilty of truancy or even mental truancy teachers offer rewards to get student’s interest instead of changing material that may be outdated and boring (Kohn, 1999, p. 71). Teachers are not

interested in what students want or need, rewards are expected to fix all problems and avoid connections with students. Furthermore, praises and rewards can be viewed as judgements from the teacher on a student's work. It becomes evaluation instead of support (Kohn, 1993, p. 59). Another aspect that increases the gap between teacher and student is trust. If a teacher promises a reward and does not follow through, then the student will no longer trust the teacher's word. This is unfortunate because many teachers want a relationship with their students. When a student asks a question the teacher offers a reward to keep the student inquisitiveness, but instead the student may repeal their openness as a result of viewing the reward as judgement. Also, if a student is familiar to receiving praise from a teacher and on occasion no praise or reward is given, then a student may believe that the work did not meet the teacher's standards. Praises and rewards also effect the bond between students. When students are given rewards or praise in front of their classmates two feelings can occur; jealousy and demoralization. When a student receives a prize over another it can be disheartening and disappointing (Kohn, 1993, p. 52). If this does not take place, then jealousy will be rampant among classmates. When competing for rewards, strife is created. Instead of residing in a community that helps others learn and succeed, students withhold any information that might help out a fellow student. Students will view fellow classmates as obstacles to success. Instead of creating a learning community in school, praise and rewards becomes an object of irony. By using rewards to promote character, teachers destroy community that creates character (Kohn, 1998, p. 20). Through praise and reward and the withholding of praise and reward, the labels of troublemaker, teacher's pet, whizz kid, and dumb kid are created (Kohn, 1993, p. 56). When students are concerned about doing well compared to their classmates, they are less likely to ask for help from the teacher (Kohn, 1999, p. 33). Also, students are concerned about how they look to their peers, to students image is more important than education. If a teacher is praising a student's work that student may never try as hard again to avoid the stereotype of teachers pet or whizz kid (Lavoie pp. 119-120). Relationships between teachers and students and among the students themselves can be greatly harmed if praise and rewards are not used with care.

Praise and reward can be a form of punishment. Rewards and punishments go hand in hand; usually when one is used, so is the other. By not giving a reward, a child is punished. For example, in a classroom setting, teachers offer rewards for the quietest student or for the student who cleans up the best. The reward could be to sit in a special chair or pick something from the prize bucket. For those who did not win, watching the winner play with the prize or sit in the special chair is punishment (Kohn, 1993, p. 51). Another way in which rewards can be used for punishments is by taking away rewards. For example, a teacher tells a class that they will have a party at the end of the week for homework completed on time, then later in the day cancels the party as a result of too much talking in the hall. By rewarding the students for a specific act and then removing the reward because of an unrelated act, students are punished by taking away something that was earned. The process of working for a reward only for it to be taken away is demoralizing to students (Kohn, 1993, pp. 52-53). Rewards can also be punishing when a student expects a reward but never actually receives the reward (Kohn, 1993, p. 52). This can relate to a tangible rewards but also to the expectancy of praise. If a student becomes expectant of praise from a teacher and it is not delivered then the student may become fearful and think that their work is not good enough when in fact it may be fine (Lavoie p. 119). Praise is also a judgement because it is conditional and is only given as a result of certain behavior or reaching a teacher's standard. Judgement "tends to create praise junkies, who quickly grow to be dependent on someone else to evaluate what they've done" (Bafile, Education World). When a teacher critiques a student's work, they are determining whether it is good or bad. This does not deal with correct, incorrect, neat, sloppy, or how a student followed the guidelines. Grading a student's creativity, comments, and opinions is judgement and can discourage students greatly (Kohn, 1993, p. 102). Furthermore, the fact that praise is generally only given when a student is successful is punishment (Lavoie p.123). This can greatly effect those student who do not achieve

well in schools. If a teacher praises all the successful students but excludes those that may be lagging behind, those students that are behind are punished every time they hear praise because they are reminded of their failure. Praise may then have a negative impact on the students that are behind (Lavoie p.123). Although praise and rewards are meant to encourage, often they result in punishing the students.

While praises and rewards can help fix a problem, the question of why the problem exists is left unattended. Praise does not ask the reason why the problem exists or search under the surface for the root of the problem (Kohn, 1993, pp. 59-60).

“Say that a student repeatedly comes to class late or daydreams while the teacher is talking. Such behavior might signal that the student has given up on the subject matter after having struggled unsuccessfully to understand the assignments--perhaps for lack of adequate study skills, perhaps because of how the teacher presents the material, perhaps for some other reason. Whatever the real problem is, it remains unsolved if our intervention consists of promising a reward for an improvement in punctuality and attentiveness (or threatening a punishment if there is no improvement). Moreover, this reward will not be delivered if the student doesn't show sufficient progress, in which case the entire exercise is likely to lead to further alienation, an even more negative self-image, and a spiral of defeat” (Kohn, 1993, p. 61).

In addition to ignoring the true problem, rewards and praises cannot change students who have disabilities, whether it is a handicap or a learning disability, such as language or attention problems - “Even the greatest reward cannot enable a person to accomplish a task of which he is incapable” (Lavoie pp. 211-212). Many teachers are too impatient to get to the root of problems and as a result use a reward to obtain quick results (Kohn, 1993, p. 62). When a teacher uses rewards, caution must be used to avoid ignoring the underlying problem.

Praise and rewards are a vital part of a classroom, but to be effective it must be used in the proper way. First, a teacher must ask, “Is praise creating conditions for the student to become more deeply involved in what he is doing? Or is he turning the task into something he does to win approval?” Next, the teacher must determine the effect of the praise by a motive examination, determine how the comments sound to the individual receiving them, and attend to the objective characteristics of what he says and how he says it (Kohn, 1993, p. 107). The teacher should provide information, not approval. This information should be something that can be used and should not be directed at the student but what the student does and should be as specific as possible. Phony praise should be avoided at all costs and the teacher should steer clear of praise that sets up competition (Kohn, 1993, p.108-110). Instead, questions should be asked that help kids reflect. As Alfie Kohn says, teachers should “talk less, ask more” (Bafile, Education World). Praise should concentrate on improvement and effort, and should direct a student's attention to how he experienced the learning process. Praise should help to develop positive personality traits and will be more effective if it is expressed in a different and exciting ways (Lavoie pp. 132-136). When giving praise, the teacher must remember to use enthusiasm and appropriate body language to avoid sending conflicting messages (Lavoie p. 123). Praise and rewards can be very effective tools in the classroom when used in the proper manner.

Integrating praise and reward into a classroom is treacherous but an important affair. To exclude praise would cause the classroom environment to lack reinforcement and recognition. The goal of enhancing performance, promoting behavior and values, and helping the student feel good about themselves would be lost. To include praise and reward, the teacher invites the possibility of manipulation, killing intrinsic motivation, ruptured relationships, punishments, and leaving the underlying problem unsolved. Although it sounds grim, there are ways to use praise and rewards in an effective way that does not harm the student. As James Boswell says, “The applause of a single

human being is of great consequence.” (Lavoie p. 132) Therefore, a teacher must determine what applause is appropriate and beneficial to the student since praise and rewards can have a substantial impact on a student’s life.

Note

¹ All the titles and page numbers referred to in this essay come from the collection listed in the Work Cited.

Work Cited

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993/1999.