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## The Negative Impact of Rewards and Ineffective Praise on Student Motivation

by Julie Kelsey

(Education 1100)

The words “praise” and “rewards” for most have a positive connotation. These words are descriptors of what can generally be termed encouragement. The use of praise or a reward is meant to provide positive feedback for doing something well or something that is desired. Yet, studies have shown that the use of this type of feedback may ultimately undermine the goal (Kohn, 1993). Research conducted by Alfie Kohn (2001) suggests that the effect is opposite; it does not develop continued performance of a rewarded behavior or help one develop a continued interest in a particular activity. This is not to say that all praise is bad, effective praise can be used in schools to help build motivation in students (Hufton, Elliott and Illushin, 2003 and Kohn, 2001). The research examined in this paper will explore these ideas from the perspective of education and discuss the importance of intrinsic motivation, the negative impact that rewards and ineffective praise can have on children in schools and it will discuss some effective uses of praise to build student motivation.

First, it is important to understand the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and why the latter is important for student success. Extrinsic motivation occurs when the cause of a behavior arises from factors outside of the individual and the task performed (Cheng and Yeh, 2009, pp. 597-598). In other words, the person performs the task in order to get the reward. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, comes from within the individual. The emphasis shifts from external forces to self determination and self regulation of actions (Cheng and Yeh, 2009, p. 598). This type of motivation is important in helping correct behavior long term as children learn to not just change their actions but self regulation implies that they understand why they should correct themselves (Kohn, 1993). Cheng and Yeh (2009) further compare the two types of motivation:

While extrinsic motivation promotes successful learning and productive behavior. Externally motivated learners may exert minimal effort to perform a task and may stop an activity when reinforcement discontinues. Intrinsic motivation has several advantages over extrinsic motivation. First of all, intrinsically motivated learners are more likely to select challenging tasks. Second, evidence suggested that learners gain more knowledge when they read material that they consider intrinsically interesting. Third, the conditions that support intrinsic motivation also promote greater creativity and better conceptual learning. Fourth, intrinsic motivation is associated with greater pleasure and more active involvement in activities. (p. 599)

Intrinsic motivation is important in education because students learn more about subjects that they are interested in and they achieve a deeper understanding of the subjects they study (Cheng and Yeh, 2009).

According to Kohn (1993), the use of praise and rewards is rooted in behaviorism. Do they work? In the short term yes. In behaviorism, one assumes that students are a bit like Skinner’s lab rats that one can change and modify behavior by simply giving the right rewards. Yet, in the long run this does not seem to be an effective strategy for human beings (Kohn, 1993). Kohn writes (1993), “...the more rewards are used, the more they seem to be needed. The more often I promise

you a goody to do something to do what I want, the more I cause you to respond to and even require these goodies.”

(p. 17). Think of this in classroom management, a reward is given to a child if he can sit still during class and not distract the others around him. The child is motivated to get the reward and his behavior seemingly improves as long as the reward is present. When the reward stops the behavior gradually returns to the state prior to the reward. As Kohn’s research indicates (1993), this is why rewards are not effective in the long term. The behavior was corrected without trying to understand why it was happening in the first place or by helping the child understand why it was important to learn to control his behavior. In summary, a reward can be effective in controlling a behavior but it does not support children in developing a good value system, nor does it help students become critical thinkers, self directed learners (Kohn, 1993, pp. 42-43).

It is important to understand the effects of praise and rewards on intrinsic motivation. Rewards are rooted in control – they are given for performing something that another individual has defined as desirable. The net result is people feel punished (Kohn, 1993, p 51). Rewards damage relationships; one person clearly has power over the other as the giver of the reward (Kohn, 1993). Even within groups rewards can foster a hostile climate. Kohn (1993) writes about a teacher rewarding the student who scores the highest on the weekly quiz. The teacher is fostering a climate of competition amongst the classmates where only one child can be called, “the winner.” What is being taught by this reward is that your classmates stand in the way of achieving the prize (p. 66). This pits children against each other and it is unlikely that they will assist each other in learning new material as they are each competing for the prize (Kohn, 1993).

Another reason rewards stifle motivation is that they ignore reasons. Kohn writes; “... rewards do not require any attention to the reasons that the trouble developed in the first place (Kohn, 1993, p. 59). A teacher does not look to the reasons why a student does not do their homework they simply bribe them with rewards to do it (Kohn, 1993). This methodology does not help the student develop pleasure from the activity, help them become actively involved in the lesson that the homework was designed to reinforce or help the teacher discover if there are reasons that make it impossible for the child to do the work at home (Kohn, 1993).

The greatest reason that rewards stifle intrinsic motivation is that they discourage risk taking (Kohn, 1993). In the earlier definition of intrinsic motivation, Cheng and Yeh (2009) described two of the characteristics of intrinsic motivation as follows; motivated learners are likely to select challenging tasks; intrinsic motivation also promotes creativity. (p. 598 ) Both of these tenants involve some element of risk taking by the active learner. Kohn(1993) says that the underlying principle of why rewards discourage risk taking can be summarized by saying, “when we are working for a reward, we do exactly what is necessary to get it and no more.”(p. 63). Kohn (1993) further elaborates:

At least 10 studies have found just that, with preschoolers working for toys, older children working for grades, and adults working for money all trying to avoid anything challenging. Further research indicates that (1) the bigger the reward, the easier task people will choose; (2) when rewards stop, those who received them earlier continue to prefer to do as little as possible; and (3) easier tasks are selected not only in situations where rewards are offered but by people who are, as a general rule, more reward oriented. (p.65)

In summary, the research by Kohn (1993) shows that rewards make people feel controlled, they discourage teamwork and cooperation and they discourage risk taking. It seems easy to conclude that rewards do not help students become intrinsically motivated learners.

Praise could still be an effective tool to motivate students, right? After all, the giver is simply trying to commend a student for doing good work. According to Kohn (2001), ineffective praise has much the same effect as rewards as it is most commonly used. Praise gets children to conform to the givers wishes without regard (Kohn, 2001). It maintains a relationship that is dependent on our evaluation and what the giver of the praise has determined to be good or bad (Kohn, 2001). It is this dependence on another's judgment that deters the student from forming their own judgment about the worth of what they have accomplished (Kohn, 1993, p. 104). Students who are looking for approval are less likely to engage in difficult task or share their ideas with others (Kohn, 2001, p. 2). Think about the words, "Good Job!" these words are really a judgment about how the giver feels about what a child has accomplished (Kohn, 2001, p. 2). Isn't it more important to determine how student feels? Intrinsic motivation comes from within not from an outsiders' assessment (Cheng and Yeh, 2009). There are times when a challenging task is presented to students and it would seem that a little praise in the beginning would help to encourage them to move ahead. Kohn (2001) writes:

Researchers keep finding that kids who are praised for doing well at a creative task tend to stumble at the next task – and they don't do as well as children who weren't praised to begin with. Why does this happen? Partly because the praise creates pressure to "keep up the good work" that gets in the way of doing so. Partly because their *interest* in what they're doing may have declined. Partly because they become less likely to take risks – a prerequisite for creativity – once they start thinking about how to keep those positive comments coming. (p. 3).

Kohn's research (2001) shows that praise like "Good Job!" is like rewards in that it manipulates children and stifles creativity.

Not all praise is ineffective. There is evidence to suggest that some praise can be used effectively and it does help to develop intrinsic motivation in learners. In a comparative study of students in St. Petersburg, Russia, Sunderland, England and Kentucky, USA (Hufton et al., 2003, pp. 377-376) the students in St. Petersburg seemed to be most motivated by the praise and feedback that they received from their teachers. The difference in their praise is that the teachers were stingy in their use of praise. While the Russian students and the teachers perceived that they were being praised their educational counterparts in England and the United States perceived their statements as little more than acknowledgement (Hufton et al., 2003, p. 377). The research further pointed out that the English and American teachers provided more evaluative feedback than task specific, formative feedback. They seemed to be driven by the idea that feedback needs to be highly positive in order to build self esteem, create interest and control behavior (Hufton et al., 2003, p. 377). In summary, the St. Petersburg teachers while being disciplined they were also allowing students to develop their own interest.

Effective praise should be used sparingly and it can be more of an acknowledgement that a student has accomplished something (Hufton et al., 2003). For example, Kohn (2001) writes:

If a child does something caring or generous, you might gently draw his attention to the effect of his action *on the other person*: "Look at Abigail's face! She seems pretty happy now that you gave her some of your snack." This is completely different from praise, where the emphasis is on how *you* feel about her sharing. (p.5)

In this way, the teacher is acknowledging the behavior and helping the child understand what they have done to make someone else happy. Children like to please others and in this case she is learning that sharing is pleasing as opposed to sharing makes her teacher pleased (Kohn, 2001).

Lastly, Kohn (2001) recommends questions as positive reinforcement. These can be used while a student is working on a project or after they have completed a task. The questions should ask the learner something specific about what they did in order to get them thinking about what they have accomplished. Kohn (2001) gives the following examples in reference to a drawing, "Asking "What was the hardest part to draw?" or "How did you figure out how to make the feet the right size?" is likely to nourish his interest in drawing" (p. 5). These kinds of questions help a learner share their enthusiasm for what they are doing and in turn can help them develop an intrinsic motivation for doing things that are pleasurable and challenging to them (Kohn, 1993, p. 599).

The research presented has shown that rewards and ineffective praise have a negative effect on student intrinsic motivation. Here is a summary of the four components of intrinsic motivation (Chen and Yeh, 2009, p. 599) compared to Kohn's research from 2001 and 1993. First, intrinsically motivated learners will select more challenging tasks (Chen and Yeh, 2009, p. 599). Research shows that rewards and praise discourage learners from selecting challenging tasks (Kohn, 1993). Second, students learn more when they read material that they find interesting (Chen and Yeh, 2009, p. 599). Students who are motivated by rewards select less challenging tasks and they choose what they want to do based on the reward rather than the task (Kohn, 1993). Third, intrinsic motivation is linked to greater creativity and a deeper understanding (Chen and Yeh, 2009, p. 599). Rewarded learners are less likely to be more creative and more likely to do only what is necessary to get the reward (Kohn, 1993). Fourth, intrinsically motivated learners enjoy what they are doing and are more active learners (Chen and Yeh, 2009, p. 599). Kohn's research (2001) has shown that rewards discourage learners from doing something that they previously enjoyed once a reward is introduced. This summary comparison concludes that rewards and ineffective praise stifle intrinsic motivation in students. Research from Kohn (2001) and Hufton, et al. (2003) suggest that effective praise can help develop intrinsic motivation. Their research indicates that praise should be limited and used more as acknowledgement. Educators should eliminate the use of broad statements like, "Good Job!" (Kohn, 2001) Instead, Kohn (2001) writes that educators should ask specific questions of the learner to help them internalize what they enjoyed about the activity and what they felt they accomplished. In this way, educators are helping the student build their own intrinsic motivation for the learning.

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