

Don't Spoil the Promise of Cooperative Learning

Response to Slavin

Where is the evidence that rewards improve motivation at all, much less for any meaningful amount of time?



Photograph by Randy Wyatt. Courtesy of Fairfax County Public Schools.

Cooperative learning can help children learn together, but using rewards and extrinsic motivators undermines their creativity.

If bribing students with rewards undermines their interest in learning and, in the long run, reduces the quality of their work, then, yes, we would have to conclude it is "so terrible"—even though this is hardly the result that Slavin (or teachers) intend.

The question is whether extrinsic motivators really do have this effect.

If students are unmotivated to begin with—perhaps because they have been assigned mind-numbing worksheets and drills—then Slavin is quite right to suggest that rewards may "have no

effect on continuing motivation." After all, their motivation can't drop any lower. But where are the studies he alludes to that ostensibly refute the work of Deci, Lepper, Amabile, Nicholls, and others by showing that motivation is *enhanced* by rewards—

and that it stays high even after there is no teacher to hand out an A or a gold star for doing the task? I can't find them.

Reward or Penalty?

A closer look at the research Slavin does cite raises more doubts about his argument than it allays. Because my space is limited here, I will mention only four examples. First, and most telling, his opening paragraph cites the work of David Johnson and Roger Johnson, and Neil Davidson in support of the idea that cooperative learning boosts achievement only if group rewards are used. But in fact, David Johnson (1990) says, "For achievement gains to occur, positive goal interdependence has to be present. Group rewards are optional." And Davidson (1990) says, "Several recent studies suggest that rewards are not always necessary to increase student achievement on problem-solving and reasoning tasks."

Second, Slavin invokes the names of Deci and Ryan (1985) to support his claim that social (as opposed to tangible) rewards can boost intrinsic motivation. But in fact, their research suggests that positive feedback will have

precisely the same motivation-killing effects as money or grades if it is experienced as controlling. Indeed, Butler (1987, p. 481) found that "subsequent performance declined after both grades and praise" and that "praise did not yield higher subsequent intrinsic motivation than grades."

Third, Slavin dismisses the Child Development Project's (1990) experience with non-reward-based cooperative learning on the grounds that these students did not outperform their peers. But in fact, when 6th graders were given an essay exam to measure higher-order reading comprehension, children in the program did significantly better than the carefully matched comparison students (effect size .34). (Slavin may have been unaware of these very recent findings from the project).

Fourth, the only evidence Slavin cites on the question of cooperative learning and intrinsic motivation is an unpublished paper by Harry Hom and his colleagues (1990). This study, however, merely compared individual rewards with group rewards; it tells us nothing about non-extrinsic cooperative learning. Moreover, reward-driven cooperative learning failed to produce higher intrinsic motivation on one of the two behavioral measures that Hom used or on the self-report measure.

Chasing Trophies

Slavin may be correct that few non-reward-based classrooms now exist in the U.S., but this hardly demonstrates that the best, let alone the only, alternative to bribing individuals is to bribe groups. And if the only studies he can cite simply compare these two versions of education-by-extrinsics, then he has failed to demonstrate his central thesis: that cooperative learning won't work unless it is shot through with artificial incentives. When presented with a success story for cooperative learning without extrinsics, such as the Group Investigation method, he mysteriously tries to claim it as further substantiation for his behaviorist approach.

If we offer children rewards for eating an unfamiliar food, they will probably like that food less as a result

If we offer children rewards for learning, they will like learning less.

(Birch et al. 1984) If we offer children rewards for learning, they will like learning less. Let's not spoil the promise of cooperative learning by turning it into yet another exercise in chasing rewards. □

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Alfie Kohn lectures widely on cooperative learning and other educational issues. He is the author of *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (Basic Books 1990) and *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Houghton Mifflin 1986). His address is 3 Sacramento Place, Cambridge, MA 02138.

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