

Extrinsic Rewards Are Education's Past, Not Its Future

Extrinsic rewards aren't necessary when schools offer engaging learning activities, programs that address social and ethical as well as cognitive development, and a supportive environment.

Alfie Kohn and Bob Slavin differ on whether extrinsic rewards promote or undermine learning in small cooperative groups.¹ To understand their differences, we must address a more fundamental question: What sorts of learning do we want to advance?

Bob Slavin's position—that extrinsic rewards promote student motivation and learning—may be valid within the context of a "facts-and-skills" curriculum. If the daily classroom regimen is mostly a mixture of basals, multiplication tables, and state capitals, then teachers do indeed need grades, certificates, prizes, and competitions to get and keep students involved. Why? Because a school life filled with fragmented, isolated learning is not intrinsically interesting or satisfying to most children. Students on a steady diet of this sort of learning may well be, as Slavin says, "unlikely to truly master a subject without some kind of reward."

Loftier goals. But educators are beginning to strive for loftier goals, and our definitions of subject matter and mastery are changing profoundly. We are recognizing that children who can memorize and apply algorithms but cannot reason well are not adequately prepared for the jobs and society of today, let alone tomorrow; that children who have reading "skills" but don't read are not literate in the way we need them to be; that education is deficient if it builds intellectual capacities but neglects other aspects of children's development.

These ideas come through clearly in a number of statements that are remarkable for their diverse origins—and for their shared vision:

- the new definitions of literacy and numeracy articulated by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics;

- the goals embodied in curriculum documents like *Turning Points* and California's frameworks;

- the understanding of learning elaborated by scholars such as Lauren Resnick and Eleanor Duckworth.²

In aiming for higher-order achievement and overall development, this broader vision requires three conditions: (1) learning that is challenging and interesting because it builds on children's natural efforts to make sense of the world; (2) a curriculum attentive to their social and ethical, as well as cognitive, development; and (3) a school environment that meets their needs for belonging and contributing.

Toward the emerging vision. Our work over the past decade in the Child Development Project indicates that *under these new conditions*, extrinsic rewards are not needed to stimulate students' engagement and perseverance. Rather, we find that rewards may indeed undermine intrinsic motivation and thoughtfulness—whether students work individually or in cooperative small groups. We have not yet done the studies needed to test these observations adequately, but some evaluation data

indicate that the Child Development Project, which deemphasizes rewards, enhances students' higher-order achievement. (The same project provides substantial evidence that schools can foster children's social and ethical development).

In sum, Bob Slavin's defense of extrinsic rewards may well be valid for the curriculum that has been, and Alfie Kohn's objection to extrinsics may be more appropriate to what public education now aspires to become—more engaging, intelligent, and humane. □

¹See (February 1991), *Educational Leadership* 48: 83–94.

²For examples, see: (1) D. Strickland and L. Morrow, (1989), *Emerging Literacy: Young Children Learn to Read and Write*, (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association); (2) *Everybody Counts*, (1989), (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press); (3) *Turning Points—Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, (1989), (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development); (4) *History-Social Science Framework and English-Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools*, (1988 and 1987, respectively), (Sacramento: California State Department of Education); (5) R. Brandt, (December 1988/January 1989), "On Learning Research: A Conversation with Lauren Resnick," *Educational Leadership* 46: 12; (6) A. Meek, (March 1991), "On Teaching about Thinking: A Conversation with Eleanor Duckworth," *Educational Leadership* 48: 30.

Eric Schaps is President, and **Catherine Lewis** is Senior Researcher, Developmental Studies Center, 111 Deerwood Pl., Suite 165, San Ramon, CA 94583.

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