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Extrinsic Rewards

Think back to elementary school, or even high school for that matter. Can you recall receiving a reward for the completion of an assignment? Or maybe you read the most books over the summer and won you and your friends a pizza party? You may even think back to when your parents gave you household chores. Did you mow the lawn for allowance money, or help do the dishes so you could sleep over at a friends? Receiving rewards for the completion of a task, or extrinsic rewards, are thought of to be detrimental to students' motivation by researchers in both the educational and psychology fields, and yet its practice is widely used in the school system. In a 2006 study, 90% of college students recalled receiving rewards in elementary school and 75% in high school (Davis, 214).

What are Extrinsic Rewards?

Extrinsic motivation, often in the form of rewards, comes from outside of an individual. Instead of gaining satisfaction from the task itself, the satisfaction is gained from the reward. Extrinsic motivations counterpart, intrinsic motivation, occurs because an individual finds the task enjoyable and interesting (Ryan, 55).

Researchers and educators alike look at extrinsic rewards as a signal to individuals that the task they are asked to complete must not be interesting, or worth doing unless they are rewarded for it (Small et al., 28). Extrinsic rewards can come in many forms, such as grades, incentives, trinkets and toys, special privileges, or even praise and recognition. Rewards, which were once thought of as a much better motivator than punishment, are really more similar than they appear. Rewards are a way to manipulate and control the behavior of an individual, similarly to punishment (Brandt).

Edward L. Deci, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, has devoted his research to studying the effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. In the early 1970's, Deci conducted several experiments to view the change in motivation as subjects performed different tasks over three different periods of time. Participants were separated into two groups, the control group and the experimental group. The first and third period was the same for each group, but during the second period, monetary rewards were given to the experimental group for the completion of a task. Deci was able to conclude that the use of this reward decreased intrinsic motivation in the experimental group in comparison to the motivation of the control group (Deci, 114). During a separate experiment, verbal rewards were offered in place of monetary ones. Subjects who were commended on their work and given positive reinforcement had an increase in intrinsic motivation (Deci, 114).

Further research conducted by Deci and Richard M. Ryan, professor of Psychology, Psychiatry and Education at the University of Rochester, concluded that individuals have varying amounts and types of motivation (Ryan, 54). According to the researchers self-determination theory, these different types of motivation related to different goals. This theory allowed them to understand that even extrinsic motivation can take two different routes. The example detailed in their research described one student who may do their homework so they will not be punished by their parents or teachers. Another student may make the connection in the value of that same homework assignment to their success in college or their future career. Both examples have extrinsic outcomes, yet the second student sees more of a choice in their completion of the task (Ryan, 60).

Extrinsic Rewards and their Relation to 21st Century Skills

A goal of today's library media specialist is not only to teach students information literacy skills, but also to help students develop into those who strive to be lifelong learners and read for the sake of reading. Extrinsic rewards are, in general, a detriment to these goals and don't enhance the learning of 21st century

skills. Many programs, such as Accelerated Reader, are widely used in schools today. The program rewards students who read and complete tasks associated with that reading (Small et al., 27). Despite the warning of a decrease in motivation, school districts are enticed by the potential for students to achieve better test scores.

There is a hope for students today to read for the pure enjoyment of reading and to develop an appreciation for all types of literature. This is intrinsic motivation at its core, and offering rewards for reading devalues it as an enjoyable activity. Providing incentives and rewards sends the wrong message to students that reading cannot possibly be fun. Students begin to compare reading to chores, and they will become not willing to do so unless a reward is provided.

As students are completing assignments, they naturally begin to develop curiosities. When offering rewards, they will be much less likely to continue the learning and discovery process on their own. Another downside to a program like Accelerated Reader is that it limits what students can read for reward. If provided a choice to read "Book A" for a prize or "Book B" for nothing, students would be more apt to read "Book A". As 21st century learners, students need to be able to make confident choices about their reading materials. Putting limitations on what's available to students leaves many other important avenues open and untaken. This limitation also deters students from reading items on the web, in newspapers and magazines, or in journals. Without voluntarily reading these variety of formats, students will not be able to develop an understanding of them and miss out on many important information literacy skills.

The connection students make with reading materials and real world situations is hindered by reward systems. Students are only concerned about receiving that prize instead of taking the time to reflect on what they have read. In order to succeed in the 21st century, intrinsic motivators should be used to support students' personal growth.

Motivational Teaching Strategies & Extrinsic Rewards

As a society, we have become accustomed to receiving rewards for work we deem uninteresting and unimportant. But at a young age, students are naturally curious and are not in need of rewards to learn. Despite rewards being a less effective form of motivation for students, they sometime become a necessity to jump start classroom participation and excitement in students. Research suggests that if rewards are to be used, they should relate to the task at hand (Small et al., 30). Instead of giving stickers or pizza parties, students can be given bookmarks, assist in collection development, or can be asked to review a new graphic novel or 'zine on the library website. Also, if rewards are not announced prior to the beginning of a task, they can be much more effective as students are not expecting them.

As shown by Deci, praise can be a useful motivator if used correctly for students who may lack self-confidence and have no motivation for a task. Students should receive specific information about the task they are succeeding at or need encouragement in (Kohn, 96). Praise and encouragement should be directed at the task rather than the individual, and be as specific and genuine as possible to be effective.

As students develop more confidence, a more intrinsic approach can be used to elicit motivation in students. One way is to provide students with opportunities to collaborate with each other. Students can work in pairs or groups on a variety of activities, which helps in developing meaningful relationships and helps boost confidence in each other. Another strategy is providing students with choice so that they feel more in control of their learning experience and become more active participants. By setting initial guidelines and parameters, students can choose what they want to read, what topics they may want to research, and how they want to present that research. Students can also be a part of determining how their work will be assessed. Rubrics can be created as a class, or students may prefer to be assessed through a group discussion. This way, student fully understand why they receive the grade they

do, and feel like they have earned that grade instead of being given it by the teacher.

Motivating students to read and excel at information literacy skills can be as simple as creating the right environment. Students need to feel safe and secure in this environment and feel like they are an important part of a community. Researcher Steven Krashen sums this form of motivation up by stating that students will read on their own if they are provided with a variety of reading materials and a quiet, safe location (McQuillan). Library media specialists have the power to set a good example to students that reading is an enjoyable activity. Motivating students by creating lesson plans with relevance that stimulate students curiosities creates a learning environment where rewards are not needed or expected.

Thinking Questions

- 1.) Recall a situation in which you were given a reward or offered an incentive for completing a task (at school, by parents, or at your job). Did you feel motivated? What is your association with the task now?
- 2.) Have you ever been the one to offer a reward to students (or your own children?) Did you notice a change in their motivation, either in the short or long term?
- 3.) In the article by Small et al., two examples of providing students with related rewards are given (students receiving bookmarks for books they have started to read, and students researching dinosaurs receive a small dinosaur toy like the one they are studying). Can you think of any other creative ways to use extrinsic rewards in the library that would have a positive impact on motivation?

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