

The Controversy over Group Rewards in Cooperative Classrooms

While the debate over the value of extrinsic rewards persists, teachers can follow a few guidelines now to help them use extrinsic rewards appropriately, while building intrinsic interest into their curriculums.

Academic controversy can be constructive and useful when the parties involved conduct a dialogue with the goal of understanding each other and arriving at a synthesis that takes all points of view into consideration. This requires listening carefully to each other's arguments and looking for their strengths rather than their weaknesses (as in a debate), the value of their insights, and the purposes they are trying to achieve. The recent exchange between Alfie Kohn and Robert Slavin concerning the use of group rewards in cooperative learning, published in the February issue of *Educational Leadership* (Kohn 1991a and 1991b, and Slavin 1991a and 1991b), represents only the first stage in this process.

A constructive controversy around this topic has been going on in the pages of *Cooperative Learning* magazine (Kohn 1990a, Slavin 1990, Schaps 1990) for several months, culminating last July in a roundtable session at the convention of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE) in Baltimore.¹ A summary of that session was published in the December 1990 issue of *Cooperative Learning* (Graves 1990). My purpose here is to carry that discussion another step forward, to discuss its applications for practitioners.

Polar Positions

Slavin and Kohn represent polar positions on the issue of group rewards. Slavin is concerned with increasing student achievement, and he believes the only demonstrably effective cooperative learning strategies are those that use group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member (Slavin 1989, 1990, 1991a, 1991b). Kohn is concerned with fostering love of learning among students, and he believes that external rewards should never be used because they will undermine students'

intrinsic motivation to learn (Kohn 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b).

From his reading of the research (much of which he has conducted himself), Slavin sees little evidence that achievement gains through cooperative learning are possible without the use of group rewards, although he acknowledges a few important exceptions, most notably Sharan's use of Group Investigation (Slavin 1989 and 1991a). In the roundtable last July, the Child Development Project and the program of "complex instruction" at Stanford were cited as additional examples (Graves 1990). In both cases, educators have made deliberate efforts to foster intrinsic motivation among students to work hard and to help their teammates, by using appealing curriculum materials, by establishing student norms for achievement and for helping others achieve, and by teaching students the appropriate skills to achieve those norms. This process is difficult and costly, however, and the research evidence for its success is still weak.

To bolster his arguments against the use of group rewards, Kohn cites a body of research evidence showing that extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation (Kohn 1990a, 1991a, 1991b). Unfortunately, this evidence is mixed and subject to alternative inter-

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pretations. A careful meta-analysis and best-evidence synthesis of this literature is still needed. The best approximation I know of at this time is Lepper (1988).

Three Questions to Guide Practice

Obviously these issues need to be settled. In the meantime, however, the business of schooling must go on, and classroom teachers need the best guidance we can give based on available evidence and practical experience. Accordingly, we will consider these three questions that broaden this debate concerning the use of extrinsic rewards in the classroom:

1. Are there forms of group rewards that minimize possible negative effects on intrinsic motivation?
2. Under what conditions will reliance on intrinsic motivation be most likely to achieve our academic goals?
3. Under what conditions may extrinsic group rewards continue to be necessary and useful?

Minimizing negative effects. Extrinsic rewards appear to have their most damaging effects on intrinsic motivation under two conditions:

1. When students would be willing to engage in the activities without the use of these rewards;
2. When the rewards may be seen by students as an attempt to manipulate and control their behavior.

Extrinsic rewards appear to have their least damaging effect on intrinsic motivation (and may actually enhance it) under the following conditions:

1. When the tasks are ones students would be unwilling to do on their own;
2. When the rewards are largely symbolic in form, serving more to communicate to students how well they are doing and their teachers' pride in their accomplishments, than as "payment" for their performance;
3. When the rewards are social rather than tangible;
4. When they are unanticipated.

A number of practical recommendations for the classroom follow from these observations. As Slavin correctly points out, however, the vast majority of tasks we expect students to perform are not ones they would be motivated to do on their own. When students are

unmotivated and the tasks are routine, some forms of group rewards may be helpful.

When extrinsic incentives seem necessary, try using symbolic rewards such as certificates of group achievement, stars, and smiley stickers, which communicate your pleasure in and appreciation of your students' efforts, rather than tangible rewards, such as small gifts and treats, which are more likely to become the focus of their attention.

Avoid the appearance of manipulation. Behavior modification is a powerful psychological tool and there are classroom situations so chaotic that its use may be justified to create sufficient order for learning to occur. But try to involve students as much as possible in setting their own goals and reward them for achieving these. Encouraging students to pursue their own goals is a form of social reward likely to increase their intrinsic motivation to learn.

Most students find the pleasure of working together in cooperative groups a reward in itself. The "social rewards" of working cooperatively probably enhance intrinsic motivation, and are among the great advantages of using cooperative learning strategies. Many teachers find that after awhile students no longer seem to need the group certificates and other external incentives that induced them to work together effectively. Kohn is skeptical that students can be weaned away from extrinsic rewards once these have been used. But the practical experience of many teachers suggests it is really quite easy. In fact, it may be more difficult to wean teachers away from routinely using these rewards even when they are no longer necessary.

Finally, unanticipated rewards, whether simply in the form of teacher recognition, a class party, or free time at the end of the day for pure fun after the class has worked hard and effectively, are powerful tools for enhancing student motivation.

Using intrinsic rewards. Group rewards do serve to motivate students to undertake routine academic tasks, such as basic skills acquisition. Increasingly, however, educators are urging discovery and problem solving approaches in science and math,

whole language learning, and simulations and role plays in social studies. With these approaches, basic skills are acquired in context, while students undertake engaging activities. Clearly, we need to make our lessons as intrinsically interesting as possible and be alert for whether their inherent fascination is sufficient to motivate our students. A continuing need for extrinsic rewards may serve as a useful indicator that our curriculum requires further examination in this regard.

Slavin (1991b) is justly concerned that in group situations the more able students may do most of the work or simply share answers with their teammates. Group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member is one way to ensure that able students take the trouble to help their teammates really learn and not just complete their group project or worksheet. Such rewards may also serve to "give permission" to students to ask for help when they need it, since otherwise they might let down their teammates.

Without group rewards, we would need to find some other means to accomplish these goals. Fostering internalized norms for high quality academic performance and helping others is a slow and difficult task, but this behavior should transfer to other situations where group rewards are not provided. The Child Development Project (Solomon 1990) and the Stanford Program for Complex Instruction (Cohen 1986) provide models for how to proceed.

Teaching students the skills to help each other effectively is also necessary—and something that Slavin's Student Team Learning approach (Slavin 1989) does not include. Good helping behavior is not automatic; it needs to be defined, modeled, and practiced. But it is a skill that will particularly benefit and challenge the more able students—and it is one they would not be likely to acquire in special programs for the gifted.

Conditions that call for extrinsic rewards. All our efforts to improve our curriculums may still leave us with a large portion of school activities students may be reluctant to engage in without some form of extrinsic reward. This is true for most adult jobs;

why should we expect school to be different? The use of cooperative learning groups, with small, largely symbolic certificates of group achievement based on the individual achievement of each group member, will usually increase student scores on standardized tests; and these learning teams can make the effort more fun. When improved test scores are our goal, we now have a proven means to attain them.

But many of us aspire to much more for our students. Slavin's Student Team Learning strategies are ideal for non-contextual basic skills acquisition. They are not ideally suited for whole language learning, mathematics problem solving, and the development of higher-order thinking skills in science and social studies. Other cooperative learning strategies are available for these purposes, however, such as Group Investigation (S. Sharan 1990, Y. Sharan 1990) and jigsaw modifications developed mainly by Australian and Canadian educators that involve groups in synthesizing and applying the information their members teach each other (Clarke et al. 1990, Kagan 1985, Reid et al. 1989). Research conducted by Shlomo Sharan and his colleagues (Sharan and Shachar 1988) with Group Investigation, in which they carefully measured higher-order thinking skills, verbal fluency, and other rich intellectual outcomes, amply demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. There is almost no formal research on achievement outcomes from the variety of other cooperative/collaborative learning strategies available, but teachers almost universally report their students are thinking more deeply as a result of their use. These informal observations, though unreported in the research journals, should not be ignored—they probably carry more weight with teachers than formal research findings.

A Shared Vision

Many of the differences between Slavin and Kohn are a matter of where they stand along a pragmatic/idealistic continuum. Both share a vision of what education should be: not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but the development of intellectual curiosity,

creativity, and problem-solving skills. By systematically using group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member, Slavin has developed and refined cooperative learning strategies that work successfully for the vast majority of learning tasks he finds teachers giving their students. Kohn fears that this very success may detract from our efforts to develop a richer and intrinsically motivating curriculum and to expect more from our students than good test scores. The contrast between Kohn's and Slavin's approaches sharpens our awareness of the implications of our instructional practices and helps us to make our choices more consciously. By focusing on the variety of forms that group rewards can take and the conditions under which these may appropriately be used, however, we can move the debate forward to address the complexities of daily practice. □

¹In addition to Kohn and Slavin, four other leaders in the field participated: Elizabeth Cohen, Professor of Education and Sociology at Stanford University and author of *Designing Groupwork* (1986); Spencer Kagan, known for his "structural" approach to cooperative learning and author of *Cooperative Learning Resources for Teachers* (1985); Dee Dishon, well-known consultant and staff developer and co-author (with Pat Wilson O'Leary) of *A Guidebook for Cooperative Learning* (1984); and Daniel Solomon, Director of Research of the Child Development Project in San Ramon, California, who is often cited by Kohn as an exemplar of his point of view (Kohn 1990b).

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