

## Should I or Should I Not

By Amber Miller

Rewards are something that I use in my classroom every day. Without them it seems as if my students have no desire to do anything in the classroom. They would rather tell jokes with their partner, eat snack, and go outside for recess. Yet, those goals are not realistic within my classroom or the school's structured curriculum, so I use them because they are convenient.

In reviewing Stipek and Brophy's claims about the strengths of rewards I have found that rewards are good for a few helpful reasons. Some of the strengths of them include the fact that rewards help to control behavior, they increase the intensity and duration of a student's effort on an assigned task, and they instill in students a purpose by which to actually complete an assignment. Though a shaky, unfounded purpose they allow for students to have something to look forward to upon completion of a task.

Yet, there are many weaknesses that seem to outweigh the positive attributes of rewards. The first is that everyone is motivated by different things, so it takes much more time in trying to isolate that which students are drawn to, while simultaneously trying to make it appealing to them. In a case study where there were two students compared, Brophy found that "B did all this week's reading on the solar system knowing that completing assignments pleases the teacher....A got really interested in knowing all about the solar system" (Brophy, 128). In concluding the results of the case study Barrett and Boggiano found that, "The majority of both groups believed that extrinsically motivated Student B would exert more effort after failure, show enhanced performance following success, exert more effort after failure, exert more overall effort in school work, and take more responsibility for completing work than intrinsically

motivated Student A” (Brophy, 128). This shows that what motivates us depends upon each student and to effectively find a way to motivate each student you have to differentiate for them. When you are already differentiating classroom instruction for 25 plus students it makes it one more thing to do to differentiate for motivation.

Another weakness with rewards is that rewards control behavior, instead of teaching a desired behavior for a long duration of time. When the reward is taken away that student ceases to exhibit the behavior that had to ensue for that child to get the reward. Students no longer take the responsibility on themselves to self-regulate their behavior and interest. There was supporting evidence for my claim in a study done with fourth and fifth graders where they found that, “both completion-dependent and performance-dependent rewards increased performance on mathematics problems during the reward condition, but decreased both performance and intrinsic motivation during a no-rewards follow up (Oliver & Williams, 2006).

Another one of my weaknesses is centered on intensity of concentrating on work. In the past I have rewarded students in my class for doing their job and following the classrooms by giving them extra computer time. Lately, I’ve noticed that one of my students will just rush through and circle anything on his morning bell work just to get done so he can ask to get on the computer. In grading his work he has received 5/10s and 4/10s on his work, due to his rushing. Brophy says, “They do whatever will garner them the most rewards with the least effort, rather than trying to do the job as well as they can to create a high quality product” (Brophy, 129). In actuality what I am doing doesn’t help him. Instead of giving him computer time when he is finished with his work I should give him computer time for when he is at least averaging an 80%.

Another problem with rewards is that they promote quantity instead of quality. The “Book It” program is a program implemented in many schools in Michigan. When students read a certain amount of books a pizza certificate is issued as a reward for their efforts. “Pizzas are very attractive rewards to most children, the program artificially makes reading a certain number of books instrumental to receiving the pizzas, and the pizzas are awarded merely for certifying that the books have been read (not for reading them carefully, responding to them thoughtfully, or taking something meaningful away from the experience)” (Brophy, 131). In essence the reward of a pizza promotes the idea that you should pick up a book, but you don’t have to become a better reader and challenge yourself. Students are good at looking like they are doing their job, but sometimes that may not be the case. Stipek says, “students can look like they are intensely engaged in intellectual tasks while they are actually reliving the home run they made at recess or planning their strategy for getting a particular girl to go to the junior prom” (Stipek, 28). I can’t recall the number of times that I’ve been daydreaming in my collegiate classes about only God knows what. But because I was quiet and looking at the teacher my behavior was coined “acceptable.”

One limitation I found with rewards is that not all students are equally awarded rewards given. Not all students have access to rewards in the same capacity as those students who behave responsibly in the classroom. There are countless times in my classroom when I reward the same children every day because those children are the ones who seem to be paying attention and doing their job. “If grades are based on competitive criteria (as they usually are), high grades will not be available to all students’ (Stipek, 27). Rewards, like competition, naturally create winners and losers and the majority will have to be losers. This reinforces the idea that when Stipek talked about teachers being awarded merit pay he said, “If it is available only to a

small percentage of them (e.g., 5 percent), most teachers would not perceive merit pay to be realistically available” (Stipek, 27).

All in all awards don't seem to promote longevity and consistency in motivating students or stopping the undesirable behavior altogether. It's convenient and something that has been an integral part of my classroom structure, but it won't be something that sticks with my children. In looking at all of the information I would have to say that I would not use rewards in my classroom because the negative consequences outweigh the positive consequences. If I want for them to take with them the behavioral and educational skills that I am teaching, then rewards are not the way to go.