

After completing the assigned readings for this unit, I now have a broad knowledge base regarding the positives and negatives of using rewards in the classroom. In a perfect world all students would be intrinsically motivated; there would be no motivational problems to discuss. In reality motivation is an issue that I deal with in my classroom on a daily basis. I teach a wide range special education in various setting throughout my school day. I teach students who are moderately cognitively impaired at both the middle school and elementary level. I also teach high school students in a regional program who are emotionally and behaviorally impaired. I am always working with a behavior specialist developing different behavior intervention plans, and most all of them have an individualized reward system built right in. I have formed an opinion that students with special needs tend to not be as intrinsically motivated as their general education peers. I do not know if that is the case, but it seems like motivating students is a huge issue of discussion for all of my colleagues in the special education department. With that being said, I know that all educators, regular or special, deal with motivational problems with their students.

Throughout my career as an educator I have spent lots of time coming up with different ways to positively reinforce my students to increase positive behavior. I have done things as simple as giving verbal praise or offering a smile. I have also spent countless hours developing point systems, token economies, giving out candy, snacks, stickers, and pop. Many of these rewards did have a positive effect on my students. Many researchers say rewarding is bribing students for behavior they should be doing anyway because it is in the best interests of themselves and the society as a whole (Brophy 129). Although I still use rewards in my class I do think that there are pros and cons to doing so. I am enjoying learning about different ways to

promote intrinsic motivation with my students. I will highlight both sides of the issue in this critique.

I will start with the benefits of using various different methods of rewards or reinforcements in the classroom. Rewarding students for positive behavior or performance can increase the incidence of that specific positive behavior happening again. The key to using rewards in the classroom is to do so appropriately. There was an abundance of research that described how to reward or reinforce appropriately; I will highlight the most relevant ideas to me.

Rewards need to be provided to in a meaningful way. The reward cannot be given for merely participating in an expected classroom activity. The educator needs to pay attention to the quality of engagement or the level performance (Brophy 133). If we go around rewarding every little behavior there is a higher chance that we will decrease intrinsic motivation. The educator needs to reward only when the level of quality or participation is at a high enough level. When done so correctly positive behavior will increase in various different settings.

Research also shows that to be effective students should be expecting the rewards because the educator should announce them in advance (Brophy 133). The students should be aware of the reward system in place and know the expectations that need to be met in order to receive that reward. It is also noted that the rewards may be more effective if they are individualized to particular students (Stipek 23). What may work for one student may not work for another. If the teacher has the opportunity to individualize the reward, it is encouraged. The educator needs to ensure that the students know what we are rewarding them for. If we go around giving them happy faces, stickers, or candy without making a connection to the behavior

being rewarded, the chances that the positive behavior will happen again on its own is not increased. When the connection from reward to behavior exists, chance that positive behavior will increase.

There is a wide range of rewards and reinforcement that educators provide. I provide a lot of social reinforcement in my classroom. For example, if a child does something correctly I may offer a smile or say “good job” (positive reinforcement), or if they are off task I may give them a discouraging look or take away their choice time (negative reinforcement). Using social reinforcement may increase the positive behavior or decrease the negative behavior (Stipek 20). I have also used a token economy in my classroom. A token economy is a formal system of behavior modification. One of the systems I have developed the students earned pennies if they hit any of the target behaviors (staying on task, not talking out of turn, increased their work completion). The student could lose their pennies for not participating or engaging in the target behaviors. Every Friday the student could take their pennies to the classroom store and purchase various different desired items (pencils, candy, stickers, tattoos, chap stick, little toys). If they did not have enough pennies they could not make a purchase that week. Token economies have primarily been used to improve social behavior (raising hand), but they have also been used to improve assignment completion and accuracy (Stipek 24). Overall, the key to rewarding to students effectively is to do so that supports students’ motivation to learn rather than encouraging them to complete activities in order to gain the reward.

On the other hand, there are weaknesses to using a reward system in the classroom. When rewards are not used appropriately, students will tend to do whatever they can to gain the most rewards with the least amount of effort. They do this rather than trying to do the assigned task the best they can to create a high quality product (Brophy 129). When this happens learning

is compromised and the students are not developing meaningful skills or knowledge. It can lead to “superficial” learning behaviors (i.e. less creativity, less problem solving) (Stipek 28).

Intrinsic motivation specialists have concerns that when a student is rewarded inappropriately it will undermine intrinsic motivation. The educator may see short-term progress, but not long-term positive effects. The effectiveness of the reward is short-lived and often does not generalize to other situations. Students tend to do really well at the start of the reward system, but that tapers off as time goes on; they seem to lose interest in the system. The student may learn to work only if they are being rewarded, and no educator wants that.

Using rewards and punishment inappropriately can adversely affect behavior and create an over-dependence on the rewards or punishment that is being used (Stipek 26). Rewards have been shown to decrease a student’s willingness to attempt a task that they perceive as challenging. They know they will not be rewarded for the attempt, so they chose not to even try. Rewards can also convey the message that the behavior is not worth doing for its own sake (Stipek 30). Students may not see the actual benefit that comes from completing the task. If educators are constantly providing positive reinforcement to their students, the students may not be willing to participate in other sorts of activities (extra-curricular groups) where they are not consistently offered that reinforcement. It undermines their desire to participate in the alternative activity (Stipek 30).

After looking at both the strengths and weaknesses to rewards systems I cannot honestly take one side over the other. I see the pros and cons of both sides of the argument. If I had to pick one side, I would be in favor of using rewards in the classroom. In my circumstance rewards are a fairly easy system to administer and I have seen some positive results in using

them. I am going to be more conscience going forward to use rewards in an appropriate and responsible manner. I know it is not necessarily healthy to create competition between the students when using the reward system (Brophy 135), so I will try and avoid that in my class. I am also going to make sure that my students understand why they are being rewarded and make sure they are not gaining rewards for superficial learning. If I follow the guidelines that the various texts lay out, I feel like rewards can be a beneficial tool in my classroom.