

Running head: KOHN, MOTIVATION, AND ME

Kohn, Motivation, and Me

Crystal G. Hammers

California State University, Stanislaus

EDMS 4100

January 30, 2008

Kohn, Motivation, and Me

As I enter the professional world of education, I am forced to ask myself questions that have no cut and dry answers. Questions like: How will I positively affect the lives that I touch? What motivates students? What is it that makes students want to learn? How do I encourage my students to be life-long lovers of learning? Is there a wrong way to motivate them? I look back on my own years as a student in the public school system and reflect on what motivated me. I think about the educators who positively and negatively affected my love (or lack of love) for learning. I try to figure out how to emulate the effective teachers and how to avoid the behaviors of the others.

What is the wrong way to motivate students? *Is there a wrong way?* And why is it wrong? Extrinsic motivation is becoming known as how *not* to motivate a student, because it is a negative motivational tool. In their essay entitled “Research on Student Motivation,” Jodi Taetle and Tricia Ryan define extrinsic motivation as the desire to accomplish a task due to encouragement stemming from outside of the person (2003). Extrinsic motivation can come in the form of candy, popcorn parties, stickers, good grades, and even a pat on the back from a favorite teacher. Taetle and Ryan explain that extrinsic motivation is actually detrimental to learning because there is no real change in student behavior or desire. The child obeys for the outside reward and is trained to seek the reward.

In my school experience, I’ve literally grown up on extrinsic “goodies.” It’s as if my teachers didn’t think learning alone would be exciting enough for us students so they made attaining candy and prizes our goal instead of enjoying the learning process. I remember the Friday popcorn parties, the sticker charts, and the homework club parties. We knew that on Fridays the students who did all their homework during the week got invited to the homework club party. The party motivated us to get that homework turned in, but it didn’t motivate us to

enjoy homework or to learn anything from the homework. We just cranked out those worksheets as fast as we could in order to watch a movie and have some pizza.

My number one motivator during my thirteen years in public school was not learning but racking up good grades. It didn't start out that way, but somehow down the road it became that way. "A's" remained my motivator throughout junior high and high school. I became so focused on getting the perfect report cards that classes were not fun anymore. I took classes that would look good on my transcript, or that I knew I'd have no problem getting and "A" in. I remember checking my grades weekly (sadly I am not exaggerating!) and obsessing over my ranking in my high school class. I even carried these bad habits over into college, strategizing in order to make the Dean's List every semester and to receive honors at this year's graduation. My point is that once I got hooked on the extrinsic rewards, I became addicted. I "learned" for the prize instead of for the joy of learning or to gain information. I am the poster child for the official theory of learning. If school is a place for learning it should be about learning and not extrinsic rewards.

Intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation that teachers should be using in their classrooms for the benefit of their students. Extrinsic motivation may be an easier tool to use, but as educators our focus needs to be on the students and how best to facilitate genuine learning experiences. Taetle and Ryan explain that intrinsic motivation comes from inside the person with no promised rewards or goodies from the outside world ("Research on Student Motivation," 2003). This type of motivation comes from inside the learner. This type of motivation puts the learner back in the driver's seat of his/her learning. Intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation that will fuel life long learning. The teacher won't follow his/her student into the work world and throw a popcorn party for him/her when s/he writes out a report! Extrinsic motivation is

short lived, but intrinsic motivation is a valuable tool to cultivate for learning within the classroom *and* in the world beyond it.

Though my school experiences are riddled with teachers who preferred to use the easy way out, a select few intrinsically motivating ones have emerged. These teachers used the students' interests to drive them on in their learning. The teachers took time to get to know their students and their students' hopes and dreams. Their classrooms were focused on the individuals that called their classroom home (room). The agenda changed with our varying interests and personal goals. The teachers devised lesson plans that peaked our interests and snagged our curiosity. I learned that when learning was not robbed of the fun factor it could be a painless and even enjoyable thing. I found out that not only could learning be fun and that I wanted to do it, but also that the absence of Friday popcorn parties wasn't so devastating after all.

My recent epiphany concerning my journey through the official theory of learning system lead me to the work of Alfie Kohn. Little did I know that Kohn had written a book which mirrored my frustrations with the official theory of learning called *Punished by Rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes* (1993). In this book Kohn attacks Behaviorism and the extrinsic motivators that teachers use to get children to do what they want. Prior to the blinders being lifted from my eyes, I thought that praise and rewards were admirable and useful in the classroom. I planned on using them in my own classroom! This semester I took a hard look into my past and saw how praise and rewards actually put me at a disadvantage concerning *why* I learn. I realized that I am a praise addict. To my horror I was planning to perpetuate the cycle of extrinsic motivation, the very thing that robbed me of many years of joy during my schooling!

Kohn speaks out on several topics regarding education, his crown jewel being anti-

standardized and high stakes testing (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/index.html>). Also on his website, Kohn addresses the overuse of the transmission model of education, the problems associated with competition in the classroom, and the downward spiral of homework. Kohn seems to tackle the seemingly invisible hypocrisies surrounding public education. Though all of his platforms are informative and incredibly persuasive, the one close to my heart is his work surrounding the use of extrinsic motivators in the aforementioned book (1993).

In his chapter entitled “The Praise Problem,” Kohn talks about the children who are most negatively affected by teacher praise. They are the ones like me, the ones when told how good a job they did “light up, eager to please, and try to please us some more” (1993, p. 104). Children like this become dependent on the teacher for praise and affirmation; they feed on it. These students don’t feel good about themselves until the teacher praises them. This is the addictive nature of praise. Sadly, Kohn believes that teachers to some extent realize this dependence and use praise to continue the cycle of dependence (p. 104). It is hard to believe that teachers would continue to foster this dependence if they knew the full extent of the consequences of their actions. This dependency on praise “leads them to measure their worth in terms of what will lead us to smile and offer the positive words they crave” (p. 104). Praise and words of affirmation are the carrot on the stick.

I remember how I felt when a teacher of mine told me how great of a job I did. I can still feel the sense of pride and accomplishment inside me. I remember thinking “if my teacher said I did good, then it must be true!” I based my satisfaction with myself on the praise I received. If the teacher said it was good then it was. If the teacher was happy with me, then I was too. It got to a point where I was dependent on that praise. If I didn’t get the praise I needed then I felt like I was not doing well in school or that the teacher didn’t like me.

The only thing worse for a teacher-pleaser like me than getting no praise was getting reprimanded. My world fell apart when my teacher was disappointed in me. It made me feel like I needed to work even harder to get her to like me again. I was trying so hard to please her already, so when I thought she wasn’t happy with me I felt like I could *never* get back in her graces! Reflecting on this has led me to the realization that this is where I learned to believe that love is conditional. That I have to do the right things to be a good and loveable person. If I do something you don’t like, maybe you won’t love me anymore; maybe I am not a good person anymore. I tried to justify that I was good and loveable and worth something through my good grades and smiling teachers. Looking back I see how big of a praise problem I had and am still recovering from to this day.

So what can teachers do to motivate children to want to learn? What can we do to avoid the praise problem? Here are my conclusions for my classroom. Thanks to *Critical Pedagogy* I am empowered “to name, to reflect critically, (and) to act” (Joan Wink, 2005, p. 3). I can name my weakness in my learning, my addiction to getting a pat on the back. I can (and have already began to) reflect critically on why it became a problem for me. And now I get to act on what I’ve learned. I get to transform myself as an educator into the teacher that can save and rehabilitate praise addicts. I can act on what I’ve learned in order to bless students who will be

calling my class home (room).

What will it take for teachers to put the fun back in learning? I'll use a simple math equation to answer that:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{hard work} \\ + \\ \text{love} \\ + \\ \text{intrinsically motivating activities} \\ - \\ \text{extrinsic behavioristic rewards.} \end{array}$$

Making learning engaging and putting fun back into the classroom won't be a cake walk, but wouldn't all effective teachers be on board if it meant more meaningful breakthroughs in their students' learning? A lot goes into becoming an effective teacher.

### References

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Ryan, T., & Taetle, J. (2003). "Research on Student Motivation." Retrieved January 21, 2008, from <http://tiger.towson.edu/~jtaetl1/paper.htm>

"Topics: What Kohn Speaks About." Retrieved January 23, 2008, from <http://alfiekohn.org/topics.htm>

Wink, J. (2005). *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.