

Reading Incentives that Work: No-Cost Strategies to Motivate Kids to Read and Love It!



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A World of Rewards

In education, it is possible to find dozens of examples of “forced” reading incentive programs, such as “Accelerated Reader”

(AR) and “Earning by Learning.” These types of programs categorize student reading levels, provide limited reading lists coordinated with those reading levels, assess student reading through

computer-based tests, and award tangible prizes when they pass the test. Those who perform best get the most rewards while those who perform less well get fewer (or no) rewards.

The problems with such reading incentive programs is that they require students to select books from a pre-established list only, test them on facts presented in the books, and award points to those who pass the test, allowing students to cash in the points for tangible prizes. If students were industrial workers trying to increase the number of widgets being produced, this might be appropriate behavior modification. But, students are learners who, it is hoped, will develop a sustained love of reading. Reading is not a simple mechanical skill to be repeated. Instead, it is a personal act that should result in aesthetic pleasure, a gain of knowledge, or both.

Typically, these “silver bullet” programs add even more stressful testing to an already test-heavy educational system, reward achievement but not effort, award unrelated prizes that have little or no long-term meaning or impact on lifelong reading behaviors, and are costly to implement.

Yet, many schools flock to programs that focus on quick results and promise higher test scores, despite the lack of evidence of long-term learning impact or potential negative effects. In this article, some of the research on the use of extrinsic rewards in schools will be reviewed, some real-life examples will be included, and the five characteristics

of reading incentive programs described above will be addressed. Finally, some effective, tried-and-true, no-cost alternative strategies will be shared that can be used to motivate long-term student reading behaviors.

What the Research Says

While much of the early research on the use of extrinsic rewards was conducted in the workplace, most of the current research focuses on using extrinsic rewards to motivate learning. These rewards are typically used (like punishments) to control and manipulate behavior. Here’s an example of one such program, as described by a school media graduate student intern. The program was schoolwide and is described as follows:

In the library, the teacher-librarian offers stickers to K-1 classes... Each time a student raises his/her hand and offers an idea, she gives that student “wings,” which is a sticker. For one class, I forgot at first and we started our discussion. Only a few kids were offering comments or answers, then the teacher-librarian came over and observed and grabbed the stickers to give out for me. Suddenly, 3/4 of the class had their hands in the air and I couldn’t seem to end the discussion to get to the next task...

The consensus of research results on extrinsic rewards indicates that they seldom have any positive long-term effects on learning and that they can actually have a negative impact (Johnson 1999; McCullers, Fabes, and Moran 1987). For example, Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Ciplewski found that children who did not have an AR program during their elementary years read significantly more in middle school than those who did have an AR program (2002/2003).

McQuillan points to several studies that found once the extrinsic incentives are taken away, participants have a lower intrinsic interest in the task than their non-rewarded counterparts

(1997). Whereas extrinsic rewards have been shown to increase productivity in tasks that are repetitious and uncomplicated (like writing spelling words), these rewards actually had negative effects on tasks of concept attainment, insight learning, and creativity (McGraw 1978). The following example from a school media graduate student shows her reflections on her own experiences as an elementary student:

My elementary school had a reading incentive program where, after reading a certain number of books, we could win a free personal pizza from a pizza store... I remember how some of my classmates would read (or skim!) as many books as they could get their hands on, just so that they could win the Book It certificate. After that program ended (I think around 4th or 5th grade), reading became “boring” and “dorky” and so on.

Furthermore, giving extrinsic rewards sends the message that the task or behavior is not, in and of itself, interesting and valuable, rather it says that the task must be unpleasant, since a reward is required to do it and that reading is perceived as a means to an end rather than its own reward (Carter 1996). The following example is from a parent:

Last year my daughter’s school sent home a form that we were supposed to mark for every fifteen minutes we read together and we were supposed to read one of each kind of book on the list... I felt our reading time was devalued by the expectation of accountability it created over valuable reading time that was ours, not theirs.

Research meta-analyses (e.g., Rummel and Feinberg 1988; Wiersma 1992; Tang and Hall 1995) found substantial support for the general hypothesis that expected tangible rewards made contingent upon doing, completing, or excelling at an interesting activity undermine intrinsic motivation for that activity (Deci, Koestner, Ryan 1999). When extrinsic rewards were given contingent



on performance of a task that would otherwise have been undertaken purely out of interest, individuals lost interest in the task (Beswick 2002).

The use of rewards with contingencies (e.g., limits, imposed goals, competitions) seems to be most detrimental to the motivation, performance, and well-being of the individuals subjected to it. Edward Deci, arguably the most recognized and productive researcher on intrinsic motivation, conducted experiments in which groups of subjects were asked to complete a puzzle. One group was paid for completing the task while those in the other group were not. The results found that the presence of an extrinsic reward such as money increased motivation temporarily for the task, but once the reward was removed, motivation dropped to a level even lower than before the reward was introduced. Not only did the subjects in the control group spend increasingly more time working on the puzzle (signifying a growing level of intrinsic motivation), but they also voluntarily returned to work on the puzzle during their free time, while the subjects in the experimental group did not (1971).

Since that initial research, Deci and his associates have published more than 100 additional research studies in which they found additional support for their initial findings that tangible extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation, with one exception (2006). When there is little intrinsic motivation to begin with (i.e., for students who are not intrinsically motivated), using extrinsic rewards can be effective for helping students internalize and identify with the value of tasks that were once considered boring or unpleasant (Deci and Ryan 1985). As Small states, "Extrinsic rewards are short lived and should be used judiciously, and only until students move to a more intrinsic orientation... the ultimate goal is for students to be motivated by their own sense of pride in their learning accomplishments and achievements rather than by some external reward" (2005, 19-20).

Limited Choice of Reading Materials

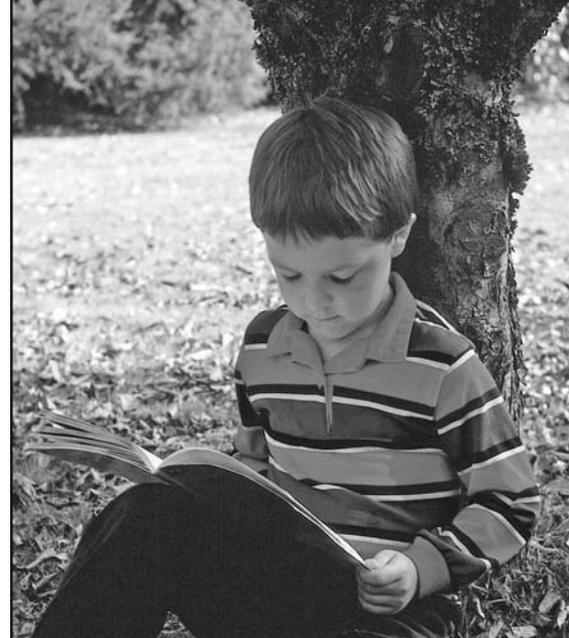
Choice is the key to a person feeling self-determined (Deci 1995). Some reading incentive programs take away what should be a leisure time, free-choice activity by dictating what books a child can/cannot read, making reading "for pleasure" just one more stressful school "subject." For teacher-librarians, this puts external limits on their library collections and detracts from library programs (like booktalks) that motivate students to try new and unfamiliar authors and genres. In addition, many teacher-librarians and teachers have found that social interaction featuring books (for example, book club discussions and booktalks) increases students' intrinsic motivation to read (Manning, 2005; Williams, Hedrick, and Tuschinski, 2008). So, why not let kids read what's important to them? Practicing reading by reading more titles more often is what helps build skills, while loving what is being read is what builds a lifelong motivation to read.

Testing

Testing kids on what is supposed to be a free-choice activity extends the current testing environment in education. Most of the tests also measure right-wrong, factual information exclusively for an activity that often requires the use of imagination, critical thinking, and interpretation skills (Brown 2003). Few of these tests ask students what they like to read, how much they enjoyed a particular book, and if they would like to read similar books. The test results do little to inform teachers and teacher-librarians about students' reading interests.

Unrelated Prizes

Many reading incentive programs offer extrinsic rewards for what should be an intrinsically pleasurable activity, thereby implying that the act of reading is only valuable if one gets "paid" for it. Often the rewards have little or



no relationship to the task itself (stickers, candy, video games, pizza parties, bicycles).

Some Little- to No-Cost Reading Incentive Strategies that Work

Many of the elaborate, formal reading incentive programs can be costly. In harsh economic times, it makes sense to offer other reading incentives that excite children about reading but cost little or no money. The library is a place where students can select reading materials that are personally interesting and relevant to them. There are many effective, low-cost motivational strategies that can be used that only require commitment and consistency. Following are some easy-to-implement examples.

► **Model good reading habits as a powerful way to motivate kids to read.** Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) and Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) are examples of programs that, if implemented correctly, can have a positive impact on student reading motivation, and development. The best part is that it's free! Following is an example of a "mini-DEAR" time implemented in one library media center:

One middle school librarian I observed treated every other library period as a DEAR time. She might start with a booktalk, then would expect every student to select some reading material (magazines, newspapers, and books were all acceptable—some of the more reluctant readers were apt to pick up *SI for Kids* while more enthusiastic readers would work on novels). As soon as all the kids [checked out materials], she would join the group and also read (thus providing a good model).

- ▶ Use a “Parents As Reading Partners (PARP)” program in the school as a way to allow students to read with other adults. Substituting the word “People” for “Parents” is more inclusive.
- ▶ Demonstrate genuine excitement and enthusiasm for reading. Such activities as storytelling, booktalks, and book trailers (promoting a book through video) introduce students to a range of reading materials and motivates them to read. Share personal, intrinsic

motivation by talking about a favorite book. Following is an example shared by a school media graduate student from her fieldwork:

I recently watched the librarian where I am doing my fieldwork read *One Grain of Rice* by Demi to a group of second graders. He first prefaced the book by saying it was about math and listened to them say “ugh.” Then he went on to build the book up as one of his favorites... He built it up so much that they couldn’t help being interested, and sure enough, they loved the book. It is a great book, but his modeling excitement about the book was a huge motivator. Really, there’s no substitute for that.

- ▶ Find creative ways for students to share favorite books and other reading materials with peers (e.g., present their own booktalks, create book trailers to be housed on the library media center’s Web site, or write book reviews for the school newspaper).
- ▶ Keep track of each student’s interests and then introduce a range of related reading materials (e.g., fiction and nonfiction books, Web sites, videos). Create a chart listing students and their interests as a reference. Give students access to the chart so they can add to it at any time.
- ▶ Think of “reading” in the broadest sense. It doesn’t matter if students want to read books, magazines, e-books, Web sites, or comic books as long as they’re reading and loving it. Stefl-Mabry states, ...school library media special-

ists know that to survive in the twenty-first century students need to be familiar with a wide variety of reading and informational material in an extensive array of formats: books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, movies, electronic sources, databases, Web pages, blogs, and so on. Innovations in traditional printing techniques along with advances in electronic technologies have transformed the ways in which we live, learn, play, and are governed (July 2006).

- ▶ Select rewards for students unlikely to have intrinsic motivation (e.g., they have experienced repeated learning failure, they are unsure of their skills), that are related to the activity (e.g., books, bookmarks, public library cards) or that ultimately become part of the learning experience. Here are a couple of diverse examples:
Children pick out books of interest and start to read. When they need to put their books away and leave the library, the teacher-librarian gives them a bookmark of their choice. If the student has not started reading the book in the library, they will receive bookmarks from their classroom teacher. This creates extrinsic motivation to start their book, but they need to sustain their motivation intrinsically.

A group of second graders come into the library to do research projects on dinosaurs. They will be working in small groups to find information. For one of the research steps, student groups turn in a topic sheet that includes the type of dinosaur they would like to research and what they hope to learn. Once that sheet is turned in, a small toy representation of their chosen dinosaur is given to each member of the group, not only as a reward for completing that part



of the assignment but also an incentive to find out more.

- ▶ Provide verbal praise or encouragement for good reading behaviors. These types of verbal rewards can increase intrinsic motivation by affirming students' ability, thereby building their self-efficacy.

Conclusions

Intrinsic motivation is the enthusiasm to engage in a task for its own sake out of interest and/or enjoyment; it is the basis of authentic human motivation. It energizes and sustains behavior through the spontaneous satisfaction one feels as a result of accomplishing a task and attaining one's internal goals or expectations (Keller 1979). Extrinsic rewards often undermine students' intrinsic motivation. Teacher-librarians can provide a learning environment that nurtures students' intrinsic motivation for reading by modeling reading behavior, demonstrating an enthusiasm for reading activities, understanding what motivates students to read, offering the full range of literacy formats, and providing praise and reinforcement for students engaged in reading activities.

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The authors would like to acknowledge the input of these additional graduate students who shared their ideas and opinions about extrinsic rewards for reading in IST 663: Integrating Motivation & Information Literacy at Syracuse University, fall 2008: Jennifer Abrams, Lesley Ann Belge, Rebecca Buerkett, Kathryn Buturla, Mira Dougherty-Johnson, Sara Edwards, Elizabeth Jurkiewicz, Sylvia Kendrick, Allison Livermore, Beth Miles, and Christine Santimaw. ◀

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