

Undermining Self-Motivation

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The importance of emotional intelligence in improving the outcomes of children's lives and their learning is well researched and documented.

I'm happy to say that, in my experience, schools are embracing the need to develop the social and emotional competencies of the children in their care. Although I am concerned that, even with the best of intentions, the practice of some educators works in opposition to their desired outcome for emotionally intelligent students.

This is most apparent when it comes to the developing of self-motivation, one of the 5 pillars of emotional intelligence. The other 4 being: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and the managing of relationships.

I define self-motivation as the ability to marshal one's emotions in the pursuit of a goal for a sense of personal accomplishment and without the need for external or immediate gratification. For self-motivated learners the reward of learning is learning itself.

Research shows that the more we use bribes and other artificial inducements to motivate people the more they lose interest in what we are bribing them to do.

In almost every sphere of endeavour the most prevalent form of motivation and behaviour control can be defined as, "Do this and you'll get that." Again research informs us that this technique will achieve short term gains and temporary compliance, especially in tasks requiring only mechanical skills. However, tasks requiring even basic cognitive skills fail to improve and, in fact, are performed more poorly even as rewards increase.

The use of rewards and praise (verbal rewards) must be viewed in the context of primary schools where, hopefully, the emphasis and intention is to teach the child and not just the subject. If that is the case then behaviour education is part and parcel of daily learning, and developing self-motivation is a critical part of the process.

Young children are in the all important formative years of brain development – the perfect time for the training that builds the habit of self-motivation. The neural wiring for such behaviour is being forged, set and entrenched and must not be jeopardised by practices that diminish the strength of that wiring.

The virtue of self-motivation permits those with it to harness emotions productively. They are more responsible, better able to focus on the task at hand and more likely to pay attention. They are also less impulsive with more self-regulation, leading to improved academic outcomes.

Self-motivation, in being a virtue must be a deeply entrenched habit of action. It cannot be something that waxes and wanes in response to the rewards being offered. Rewards and praise must be questioned and their excessive and unwarranted use curtailed in the light of current research and evidence.

It must be accepted that if rewards worked to build intrinsic motivation they would become unnecessary due to their own success. Therefore, if used in the early years of child development their effectiveness would soon produce self-motivated learners who required no inducements to

maintain their engagement and learning as they progressed through school. The fact that rewards lead to the ongoing need for more rewards is proof of their failure to develop self-motivation.

The question frequently asked when considering rewards for achievement in any field of endeavour is, “What’s wrong with that?” This is the wrong question. In the context of developing the virtue of self-motivation in young children and the intrinsic versus extrinsic desire to learn, the question must be, “Is a reward necessary?”

If it is necessary, then it’s wrong simply because it is being used to manipulate, lure and extrinsically motivate. And if it’s not necessary then why are we doing it?

Hence rewards, if used, must be used very sparingly and with the right motive and intention so as not to undermine self-motivation. They should also be focussed on the acknowledgement, recognition and/or appreciation of a virtue that has been modelled in the attainment of an outcome and not just on the outcome itself.

Used in this manner, rewards can be the way a school community highlights the virtuous behaviour of an individual/s that has underpinned his/her achievement and would be of benefit to all to employ and master.

It can be anticipated that students receiving rewards couched in these terms would model humility and thereby serve as a role model of that virtue rather than display arrogance or superiority.

Should that not be the case then it would be reasonable to assume that the reward was solely for innate ability rather than the virtuous behaviour required to fulfil that ability.

Take an athlete who wins a gold medal. Implicit in that medal, and being acknowledged as much as first place itself, are the virtues required to attain that standing. These virtues are necessary in elite or top-end sport (or music, the arts, academia etc.) as the number of people with innate talent and the commitment to pursuing excellence ensures that talent alone will not guarantee its achievement.

In awarding the athlete a gold medal, the community makes them an obvious beacon of the virtuous behaviour (resilience, persistence, courage, commitment, loyalty, honesty, etc.) necessary in the pursuit of excellence.

Medals on school sports days and certificates for academic achievements however, raise some questions.

If winning these awards is not dependent upon the virtuous behaviour of students with similar or equal ability then no assurance can be given that the awards are for anything other than innate ability or natural intelligence.

Competing for such awards on an uneven playing field of ability makes it more likely that individuals will rise to the top without the need to employ virtues that demonstrate strong character.

This may lead to awards being used to simply highlight innate ability and lead to expressions of behaviour that reveal the ugly and destructive side of competition and a culture of “haves and have-nots.”

We can look to some weight loss programs for examples of extrinsic rewards that diminish motivation and are contradictory to the desired outcome.

If the outcome for losing weight over the course of a week is to reward yourself with a bar of chocolate, is this wrong? No – as far as immediate motivation and the achievement of a short term goal is concerned. But is it necessary? And does it alter the motivation for the long term objective of maintaining ideal weight and sustained health improvements?

If chocolate is the motivation then once weight loss has been achieved the chocolate bar becomes the temptation that puts the weight back on.

The motivation must be the weight loss itself and all the associated benefits – one of which can't be to eat chocolate!

Essentially a weight loss regime is looking at behaviour and lifestyle changes – the intrinsic rewards for which are all the benefits and feel goods of doing so.

In primary school a behaviour education process is similarly looking for behaviour and lifestyle changes that offer every individual far greater benefits than simply receiving extrinsic rewards.

The value of self-motivation cannot be overstated. We need only look at our own lives to see that. Many of us will rue a missed opportunity or two simply because we lacked the motivation to take action when necessary. On how many occasions in our lives have we fallen short of our potential because our self-motivation floundered? And how many of us have been left with that hollow feeling of knowing our dreams failed to materialise because we couldn't find the necessary get-up-an-go to make things happen?

Conversely, think of the deep satisfaction and sense of inner strength we felt when we achieved something simply because we wanted to. When we gave everything with no need for a reward. When the real reward was to look inwards and see that at the moment of being tested we were not found wanting.