B is for Bribe

Garrett S. Griffin

Dr. Alan Douglas
Advanced Psychological Foundations
ED 6400

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I have always been motivated to excel, but I have never been a perfectionist. The majority of my high school courses failed to challenge me, until AP physics and trig came along. When I earned Bs in those classes, I was not disappointed. I had pushed myself intellectually; AP physics remains the hardest course I have ever taken. I realized then earning a B in a tough class can feel more exhilarating than earning an A in an easy class. A 3.9 unweighted GPA in high school and a 3.8 in college reveals there were not too many Bs after those. The Bs in college (here come the excuses) were mostly the result of subjective grading of film editing projects. (Art students have it worst, I imagine, as everything they do is graded by the whims and tastes of a professor. Who has the right to "grade" a piece of art, anyway?) I have always felt more comfortable with a B if it was due to points lost when I did not know the answer on a test. I like objectivity.

I have always enjoyed learning and studying, and feel I learned a great deal in high school. College, as will be explained, was a different story. I always aimed to earn high grades. Getting an A was especially important to me if I felt unchallenged in class. There really was no excuse if it was easy, right? I took great pride in As, as a symbol of my intellect, perseverance, and (sometimes) hard work in a class. An A was the reward I felt I deserved, and I wore it as a badge of honor.

Enter Alfie Kohn, author and educator. In *Punished by Rewards*, Kohn argues that the pursuit of high grades is not conducive to learning, motivation, or creativity. All types of incentives, in fact, from candy to grades to cash, are counterproductive in helping students grow and achieve. The incentive-based learning embraced by schools is rooted in behaviorism, which was developed by psychologist B. F. Skinner. Kohn writes, "In the case of Skinnerian theory, the human self has been yanked up by its roots and the person reduced to a repertoire of

behaviors" (1999, p. 25). Skinner thought there was no such thing as free will or choice; a human action is simply the effect of an extrinsic cause. Kohn describes it as: "What we are is nothing other than what we do" (p. 9). And if our behavior is nothing more than an effect, a cause can be manipulated in order to change behavior. A stimulus will automatically and naturally modify actions. It is called operant conditioning. "Operant conditioning...is concerned with how an action may be controlled by a stimulus that comes after it....When a reward—Skinner preferred the term 'reinforcement'—follows a behavior, that behavior is likely to be repeated" (p. 5). Related to this theory is what the author labels "popular behaviorism": "Do this and you'll get that" (p. 3). Students are promised (by teachers and parents alike) gold stars or free pizza or money or good grades if they study harder, if they do well on a test or in a class. In the same way, Kohn explains in detail, bonuses and rewards are granted in the workplace if employees meet sales goals or other quotas. From the classroom to the office, rewards-based performance has been entrenched in our culture for centuries.

Kohn's message is that it is both inappropriate and ineffective to offer rewards to motivate students. He is correct when he says to offer bribes is to treat children like animals. "Surely we know that human beings can reflect on rewards and develop complicated expectations and opinions about them (and about the activities for which they are being dispensed) in a way animals cannot. Yet it is not an accident that the theory behind 'Do this and you'll get that' derives from work with other species...pop behaviorism is by its very nature dehumanizing" (pp. 24-25). Behaviorists may refute the notion of complicated expectations and opinions. Skinner (who experimented with rats) saw humans and animals as different only in the behaviors they display (p. 6) and like any pet humans "learn or work in order to obtain rewards" (p. 25). Kohn declares this simplistic view is "inaccurate" (p. 25). Rewards (and punishments) are also dehumanizing

because “the practice is, at its core, neither more nor less than a way of trying to control people” (p. 26). Rewards are a way to “seduce” someone into doing something the controller believes that someone would not do on their own (p. 26). Using rewards as a means of controlling students means that the rewards are not intended to benefit the student at all, but rather the instructor. Teachers wish to modify behavior, whether it is making students score higher on tests or making them settle down and be quiet. This does not serve the needs of children. Worse, what harm it may cause if the student begins to feel manipulated (p. 31).

The author builds a case against the effectiveness of rewards. Kohn provides a wealth of research to support his case: “If it does make sense to measure the effectiveness of rewards on the basis of whether they produce lasting change, the research suggests that they fail miserably” (p. 37). Studies revealed that “fourth graders performed more poorly on a task when they were offered the very reward (some sort of toy or candy) that they had earlier indicated they especially liked” (p. 43) and “high school students were given five different tasks, some testing their memory and some requiring creativity. Once again, some were promised a reward while others were not. And once again, regardless of the task, the rewarded subjects didn't do nearly as well” (p. 44). Third graders and college students alike scored lower on IQ tests when they expected a reward (p. 44). Kohn notes that even “as the studies became more sophisticated, the same basic conclusion was repeatedly confirmed” (p. 44) and concludes by saying “*rewards usually improve performance on at extremely simple—indeed, mindless—tasks, and even then they improve only quantitative performance* [his italics]” (p. 46). With an incentive, creativity, quality of work, and interest in a task all decline. This is because in addition to controlling by seduction (p. 51), rewards also harm relationships by making the controlled feel “evaluated rather than supported” (p. 59), fail to provide reasons to the controlled as to why he or she should or

should not do something (p. 59), and they dissuade children from taking risks, doing more than what is necessary to get the treat (p. 63).

Kohn's bias is that of a teacher. He has seen the harmful effects of rewards first-hand, and one can tell in his prose he cares deeply about students and about improving American schools. I believe that he sees the schools as the most important place to do away with rewards. At home, rewards are about chores and etiquette; in the office, they are about the bottom line. But in schools, rewards concern education. The following is possibly Kohn's best passage concerning rewards (grades) in our schools:

> In getting students to concentrate on the grades they will receive for successfully completing an assignment, we may manage to get them to do it. But what sort of tasks will they come to prefer as a result? Every time the teacher reminds the class what an assignment is "worth" (not in terms of its meaning, of course, but in terms of how many points toward a grade it represents), every time a parent asks a child what he "got" on a paper (rather than what he got from the act of writing it), an important lesson is being taught. The lesson is that school is not about playing with ideas or taking intellectual risks; it is about doing what is necessary, and only what is necessary, to snag a better letter or number (p. 66).

Speaking from experience, this rings true. In one of my undergraduate history courses, we were given chapter questions from our textbook each week. Those questions would later appear on our weekly tests. Finding the information needed to take and succeed on the test was easy: the answers to the chapter questions appeared at the beginning of each paragraph. I remember thinking to myself, as I skimmed the first sentence of each paragraph and nothing else, how I wished I was reading the entire book for my own enjoyment, rather than little bits for class. It was an interesting book, to be sure, but I had other classes, other homework to get done. I did only what was necessary. Further, I realized that doing what you love for class or pay or anyone else but you kills that love. This was one of the reasons I became bored with my major.

My agreement with Kohn is absolute when he writes, "We assume that people naturally

avoid challenging themselves, that it is 'human nature' to be lazy. The evidence shows that if anything deserves to be called natural, it is the tendency to seek optimal challenge, to struggle to make sense of the world, to fool around with unfamiliar ideas...we retreat from doing so and take the easy way out only when something else intervenes—something like rewards" (p. 66). I can certainly be put in the category of one who desires to do hard things and learn on my own. Some of my best education has come from books that I studied outside of school. During my final year of undergrad, I became disheartened because I realized that college had been too easy. I felt I had learned nothing. There was not *one* class that made me push the boundaries of what I could do. Now the As on my transcript seem worthless to me, because they were earned without strife or challenge, and I regret not finding the hardest courses at my university and taking them. I would rather have a transcript full of Bs and Cs if it meant I had pushed myself to the limit and broadened my mind. I saw firsthand how "*extrinsic rewards reduce intrinsic motivation* [his italics]" (p. 71).

If interest and motivation suffer with the promise of good grades, Kohn argues schools must move to replace those extrinsic motivators by encouraging those natural intrinsic motivators. De-emphasizing rewards will improve learning because children begin schooling longing to "play with words and numbers and ideas, asking questions ceaselessly, with as purely intrinsic a motivation as can be imagined" (p. 144). Students *want* to explore and discover. As evidence, Kohn points to a memory study that showed the *interest* in a passage given to third and fourth graders was 30 times more important than how readable the passage was (p. 145). Students remember and learn best when what they study interests them. It is the calling of the teacher to make learning exciting and student-based, discovering what students want to know and encouraging the pursuit of that knowledge, without the threat of an F or the promise of an A. The

author suggests making learning active (hands-on, allowing students to touch and do), explaining why an assignment is valuable for learning, and exemplifying the yearning for knowledge and love of a subject in word and deed (pp. 211-212). In that way, students will not feel that information is simply being crammed down their throats. They will feel they are a part of a journey of discovery, with their peers and their teacher.

Kohn offers several pragmatic methods of diminishing the importance of grades. I completely agree with his suggestions to never "grade students while they are still learning something," "grade for effort," or "grade on a curve" (pp. 208-209). However, I do not agree with all his ideas. Kohn writes:

> Even if you must come up with a grade at the end of the term, **limit the number of assignments for which you give a letter or number grade, or better yet, stop the practice all together.** Offer substantial comments instead, in writing or in person...Offer to discuss privately with any [nervous] student the grade he or she would probably receive if report cards were handed out that day (p. 208).

I harbor concerns about this suggestion, regarding the case of stopping the "practice all together." While I agree it would be best for the majority of assignments to be ungraded (and without "completion points") to facilitate true learning, offering no grades at all is troubling. The problem is subjectivity and justification. Though I understand subjectivity is my prerogative as an educator, if I am forced to "come up with" a final grade for each student, and judge that Jimmy deserves a C, when I get an angry phone call from his parents all I will be able to point to as evidence for the grade will be comments on assignments that Jimmy has long thrown away or lost. I will offer a verbal defense of the decision, but it will be weak without any measurements indicating why he deserved a C. There will be parents who read the assignments and comments (and might agree with my assigned grade), but I expect the majority will not; sometimes the final letter grade is all they look at. Perhaps I am too concerned with the parents' opinion, but I think

not. A student's development is my primary concern, but I cannot leave mom and dad in the dark. My caution toward subjectivity will reflect in my teaching; finding a balance between best encouraging a child's intrinsic motivation and avoiding total immeasurability will be important to me.

I find another of Kohn's suggestions more agreeable:

> If you feel you must not only comment on certain assignments but also give them a mark, at least **limit the number of gradations.** For example, switch from A/B/C/D/F to check-plus/check/check-minus (p. 208).

Again, only the minority of assignments would be graded. Those that were would receive one of these three grades, which could then be used to determine the final letter grade. Perhaps if a student has more checks that check-pluses or check-minuses, that student would earn a B. The point is, if I am forced to provide a letter grade at the end, I will be more equipped to justify that grade, while leaving the emphasis throughout the year on grade-free learning. It is also critical to verbalize the diminished importance of grades, to tell students to be concerned only with what intrigues them, not on what grade they will receive at the end. Knowing that any graded assignment could be improved after the fact might also lessen anxiety and improve motivation.

Punished by Rewards contains nothing but ways to help students. A proponent of teaching as a science (rather than an art) would find this book invaluable. The methods and supporting research are overwhelming. Educators do a disservice to students by continuing to offer rewards. Kohn says it best: “If you have been promised a reward, you come to see the task as something that stands between you and it. The easier that job is, the faster you can be done with it and pick up your prize. It's logical, all right, but the practical implications are staggering. Our workplaces and classrooms, saturated in pop behaviorism as they are, have the effect of discouraging people from taking risks, thinking creatively, and challenging themselves” (p. 65).

This status quo must be eradicated, especially in education. American schools should follow Kohn's sage advice in an effort to cease creating incentive-needy automatons who do the bare minimum to get by and to begin molding students into people who enjoy learning and traverse the path of knowledge on their own.

Reference List

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes.* Houghton Mifflin Company: New York, New York.