

Understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as driving forces of real educational change

Reading task 1

For many adults - both parents and teachers - there is a persistent misconception that a child does not know what is good for them and would never do it on their own. Thus, it must be forced to do so, for better or for worse. There is also another widely accepted misconception that it doesn't matter how a child learns something, as long as he learns it. This justifies various coercive practices. When a child does not learn as adults imagine he or she should, the most common means of coercion are threats, rewards, praise, and competitions. They are widely used in blissful ignorance of how they actually affect a child's natural and healthy development.

1. An explanation of their negative effects can be found in the theory of motivation

Everything a person does has a reason - a motive, even if not always outwardly obvious. Among the basic motives for our behaviour is the satisfaction of our needs. Unmet needs (needs are not the same as wants) evoke negative emotions in us. So we seek to satisfy them. Ways of satisfying them are not always positive (e.g., clowning around with a child to satisfy a need for attention, etc.).

Another motive for our behaviour is that we enjoy an activity, we take pleasure in it. No one has to force us to do it; if we have the opportunity to do it, we do it.

But then we also do activities that are not fun or enjoyable, but we still do them on our own, without coercion. These are activities that make sense to us, that we believe are right.

All of this falls under the term intrinsic motivation.

And then there are activities that we would not do on our own because they do not fall into either of the above categories - they do not satisfy our needs, they do not amuse us, we do not see the point in them. But when someone else needs us to do such activities - for his needs, for his goals (for example, to raise a child to be a decent, educated person), he basically has two options for doing so: either he will succeed in convincing us of the meaningfulness of such an activity, or he will use proxy reasons to get us to do it anyway: he will threaten us with something, or promise a reward.

All this falls under the notion of extrinsic motivation.

2. How extrinsic motivation works

First of all, we will only do an activity we perform out of extrinsic motivation as long as we are threatened with something or as long as we are worth the reward offered. When these extrinsic motives pass, there is no reason to continue the activity.

Nor will we strive for a better quality than that required to obtain the reward or which will guarantee that we avoid unpleasantness.

One of the most devastating effects of rewards lies in the "message" we unconsciously send whenever we promise a reward for something: that the desired activity is not good enough in itself to be done just for the sake of it, without reward. If it were something of value, I wouldn't have to be bribed to do it - a conclusion that very young children will come to (without, of course, making it explicit). Whether the desired activity is learning, cleaning, personal hygiene, good manners...

In school, grades fulfil this function. Stars, smiley faces, little bees, A's make it clear early on to a little first grader that the goal of school is to get good grades and other rewards (praise), not learning itself - that is relegated to a mere means. The downgrading occurs even when the desired activity was originally pursued out of intrinsic motivation. Once adults begin to offer rewards for it (in the mistaken belief that this will strengthen the child's interest in the activity), interest temporarily or even permanently disappears.

Rewards are usually promised in advance and conditions are set for obtaining them. This has a negative impact on creativity (the development of which is a popular stated aim of the school) - only what is asked for is done in return for a reward, there is no reason to use creativity, which can even be a barrier to obtaining a reward.

Another characteristic of both rewards and punishments is that they must increase in order to still work.

Whether children do activities out of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation also has an impact on personality development

It is not just about the quality of the activity. A surprisingly fast dependence on extrinsic motivation develops. Instead of taking their own initiative, children become accustomed to waiting for stimuli or instructions from the environment as to whether or not they should do something. The consequence can be that the child (and later the adolescent and adult) hardly does anything on his or her own initiative.

A new perspective on the long-term consequences of extrinsic motivation was brought by American psychologists E. Deci and R. Ryan in their self-determination theory. They identified three basic needs, the satisfaction of which is a condition for the maintenance of intrinsic motivation. These needs are the need for autonomy (i.e., to make decisions about things that concern me), the need to feel competent (i.e., to choose courses of action toward a goal according to oneself), and good relationships. An important question: what does the school offer of these? If a child grows up in an environment where these needs are frustrated significantly and in the long term, the risk of dependence on external motivation increases. In adulthood, such people set different life goals than people who have retained intrinsic motivation. Those addicted to extrinsic motivation are focused on success, career, accumulation of wealth, and areas in which they have the opportunity to compare themselves with others. Research shows that even when they achieve their goals, it is not a source of life satisfaction. On the contrary, people who maintain intrinsic motivation focus on self-development, education, creating and maintaining good relationships, and contributing to the community. And this is the source of their life satisfaction.

Other research by Carol Dweck has confirmed that praise (praise is verbal reward) for good performance tends to lead children to take risks (not choosing more challenging tasks) so that they don't find out they are not so great. And their subsequent performances are subsequently worse than the children who were not praised, who only received feedback on how they did.

3. Why traditional schools have no escape from using extrinsic motivation

Efforts to reform the current school system naturally stress the importance of intrinsic motivation in pupils. In particular, they seek to do this by introducing more varied methods into teaching than mere explanation. However, even with the best efforts, the traditional school can never achieve intrinsic motivation for all pupils in the classroom. Above all, because a uniform teaching content with a uniform way of conveying it cannot meet the needs of such a variety of children in the classroom (different in aptitude, level of development, learning styles, interests, personality traits, etc.). There will always be children (and let us not console ourselves with the idea that there are few) for whom the compulsory curriculum is completely out of touch with their needs or even their prerequisites for mastery or does not make sense to them. If a school wants to teach children anything in these circumstances, it is downright impossible for it to avoid extrinsic motivation.

Any reforms that do not go to the heart of the matter are doomed to failure. The government's Education Policy Strategy 2030+, adopted a week ago, is one of them. The essence of the matter is the same compulsory curriculum for all. Merely reducing the curriculum while retaining the obligation to "unlearn" it will not change much. It goes against the needs of autonomy and competence. There is no escape from a compulsory curriculum for either children or teachers. Thus, despite all the proclamations, there is no escape from extrinsic motivation, with all its consequences described above.

References

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