

It's Not About Behavior

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Plenty of policies and programs limit our ability to do right by children. But perhaps the most restrictive virtual straitjacket that educators face is behaviorism – a psychological theory that would have us focus exclusively on what can be seen and measured, that ignores or dismisses inner experience and reduces wholes to parts. It also suggests that everything people do can be explained as a quest for reinforcement – and, by implication, that we can control others by rewarding them selectively.

Allow me, then, to propose this rule of thumb: *The value of any book, article, or presentation intended for teachers (or parents) is inversely related to the number of times the word "behavior" appears in it.* The more our attention is fixed on the surface, the more we slight students' underlying motives, values, and needs.

It's been decades since academic psychology took seriously the orthodox behaviorism of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner, which by now has shrunk to a cult-like clan of "behavior analysts." But, alas, its reductionist influence lives on – in classroom (and schoolwide) management programs like PBIS and Class Dojo, in scripted curricula and the reduction of children's learning to "data," in grades and rubrics, in "competency"- and

“proficiency”-based approaches to instruction, in standardized assessments, in reading incentives and merit pay for teachers.

Some of these variants are marketed as new innovations. But if competence or proficiency is still defined as the mastery of discrete skills or bits of knowledge, it reflects the same Skinnerian model that was developed on rodents and pigeons. Similarly, grades are no less destructive just because they are “standards-based.” Formative assessment can be as reductive as summative tests, particularly if it’s done continuously. Reward programs are controlling and counterproductive even when they’re implemented with a cute app.

In preparing a new Afterword for the 25th-anniversary edition of my book *Punished by Rewards*, I’ve sorted through scores of recent studies on these subjects. I’m struck by how research continues to find that the best predictor of excellence is intrinsic motivation (finding a task valuable in its own right) – and that this interest is reliably undermined by *extrinsic* motivation (doing something to get a reward). New experiments confirm that children tend to become less concerned about others once they’ve been rewarded for helping or sharing. Likewise, paying students for better grades or test scores is rarely effective – never mind that the goal is utterly misconceived.

Over and over – in schools, families, and workplaces – researchers continue to find that the more you reward people for doing something, the more they lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Often, too, they end up not doing it as well as those who weren’t treated like bundles of behaviors to be managed and manipulated.

But the enduring lesson for educators isn’t just that “positive reinforcement” turns out to be anything but positive. It also concerns the conceptual dead-end of behaviorism more generally. Every day, and with every child,

we need to keep in mind that behaviors are just the protruding tip of the proverbial iceberg. What matters more than “What?” or “How much?” is “How come?”

A few illustrations:

* The best predictor of how well students will fare in school later may not be how well they fared in school earlier. It’s *why* they think they’ve done as well as they have. The key is not measurable achievement, in other words, but how success is experienced and explained.[1]

* Is “grit” or self-discipline desirable? Someone preoccupied with behavior may say yes without bothering to consider the student’s possible motives. Does she love what she’s doing – or keep at it because of a desperate need to prove her competence? Whether persistence is constructive depends, among other things, on whether it’s animated by passion or compulsion.

* New research confirms that financial incentives fail over the long haul to get people to lose weight, quit smoking, or use the gym.[2] Partly that’s because what matters is under the surface. So, too, for students who eat too much or too little, or who struggle with substance abuse. “How do we get them to change their behavior?” is a shallow and unproductive question. Try: “Who is this kid? What needs or fears might explain what he’s doing?”

* Behaviorists may monitor whether kids’ eyes are on the teacher, but this means very little. Two University of Wisconsin researchers videotaped upper-elementary math students, then asked them later what they’d been thinking about and also assessed their understanding of the lessons. Whether they had appeared engaged was unrelated to their mental life – and the latter better predicted achievement. (A student might look like she’s paying close attention while actually “worrying about her performance and the possibility

of failure.”) As the authors concluded, “Behavioral measures, such as observations of on-task behavior (‘time on task’), convey limited information about classroom learning.”

* Are affluent kids stressed out because they’re overscheduled? Suniya Luthar at Teachers College and her colleagues found that the number of extracurriculars they were participating in – the measurable behavior – was basically irrelevant. What mattered was how they thought their parents felt about what they were doing.

These examples could be multiplied indefinitely – and of course they apply to parenting as well as teaching. (Thus, what counts isn’t whether a child says “I’m sorry” after hurting someone but whether she actually feels remorse. If not, then insisting she apologize just teaches insincerity.) It applies to adults, too. For example, a 2005 study showed that sacrificing for one’s spouse doesn’t predict the relationship’s length or quality. Rather, the relevant variable is the *reason* people do so.

It’s time we outgrew this limited and limiting psychological theory. That means attending less to students’ behaviors and more to the students themselves.

NOTES

1. See the research cited in chapter 2 (“Getting Motivation Wrong”) of my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

2. Relevant studies are described in the newly published edition of *Punished by Rewards* (Houghton Mifflin, 2018), pp. 285-88.

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