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Learning to Work

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For nearly two months, in the closet of a Milwaukee Public School, my graduate students and I had struggled tutoring a third-grader. Despite following an "effective" tutoring system closely and lavishly providing praise whenever "J" performed well, she worked ever more slowly.

This, of course, is an old story not unique to disadvantaged children living in 20th-century Milwaukee. In the 12th century, for example, Rabbi Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish scholars, recognized that many Jewish children did not value studying Torah. Perhaps the Rabbi had told his students that they would one day benefit from hard study and perhaps, like us, he had discovered that strategy ineffective. Instead, he offered figs or other valued foods as rewards. As the students advanced and their preferences changed, the rewards also changed to clothing and then to money.

The principal of J's school was, however, no Maimonides. When I discussed the possibility of using special rewards to motivate J's learning, I was told that learning is its own reward. As I visited various classrooms, however, I noticed one teacher using gold stars and another candy to reward learning.

J's teacher used cookies as rewards. She agreed to schedule a meeting at school with J, her mother, and my research group to discuss setting up a home-based reward system. At the meeting, we explained that J could earn points in the daily tutoring sessions by reading correctly and answering comprehension questions correctly. Furthermore, that each day J would be given a sheet documenting her earnings so that J and her mother could enter the points into a bank book, at home that evening. Finally, J could withdraw points to purchase rewards that had been negotiated in a contract.

Several days later we met J and her mother at their home. Ice-cream, cake, or extra television time were freely available and, consequently, could not be used as rewards. J was not responsible for household chores, so time-out from chores could not be used as a reward. J's

mother, of course, had wanted J to help at home but J had managed to do otherwise. I found this upsetting until J's mother explained that they lived in a dangerous neighborhood and that she could best protect J, by rewarding J for staying at home and not in the streets.

I can't recall the details of the reward list that we negotiated but like many we established with inner-city children it likely included money (one point was worth a penny), candy, toys, going to a restaurant for dinner, and the most valued activity: visiting grandparents.

With the behavioral contract in place, we again tutored J and she, as usual, refused to reread a passage in which she had made an error. This time, however, I did not mention the importance of learning but remained silent. After several minutes she looked up and said, "How am I going to earn those good things we talked about." I said, "Try this again." With the contract in place, J worked hard to earn points and thereby improved her reading.

I had intended to show J's mother how she could easily expand the reward system to motivate her daughter's doing well in school and accepting responsibilities at home. Sadly, we never met again. Some years later I learned that J had become pregnant at the age of 13.

Over the years we managed to tutor several handfuls of children. Almost all the students worked hard and progressed provided they were paid for learning. The weakest link in the system was not the children, but parents who would violate the contract by not paying.

We had hoped, of course, to achieve much more. When I speak with others who work with inner-city children I am often told "keep on trying. If you influence just one child for the better consider it a big win!" Such low expectations may protect one's ego but they don't help educate children. I believe that most of the children failing in our inner-city, public schools do so because they are insufficiently motivated. When learning becomes work these children go on strike. Spacious classrooms will not make these students work harder nor will longer school days or school years nor more well-credentialed, expert teachers.

The single change that would make the largest difference in urban education is to adapt the reward system we used with J, for use with entire public schools that have many students like J. For example, children could be tested daily, in two learning areas, with their scores determining level of reward.

Over the years, I have proposed establishing behavioral contracts to pay inner-city children for learning. It is not a popular idea.

I have been told that pay will not enhance learning but there is a large literature, see Stephen Flora's *The Power of Reinforcement* (2004), that indicates that contracting with children produces learning.

I have been told that pay will undermine intrinsic interest. Yes, social psychologists have found evidence for this, particularly when children are promised and given rewards merely for engaging in a task regardless of the quantity or quality of the work. When children, however, are promised and receive rewards for superior work important capabilities such as reading, doing math, and writing well can be acquired. Capabilities are not readily lost once pay is terminated. Moreover, such capabilities will allow children to earn rewards in the world beyond the classroom.

I have been told that paying children for learning is bribery. Bribery, however, involves a powerful person inducing another to behave in ways that violate the latter's self-interest. Paying children to learn is not bribery when children will want meaningful, well-paying work as adults.

I have been told that children should learn without pay. At one time, of course, the vast majority of children learned without obvious extrinsic rewards when learning was supported in other ways. These supports included having a loving family or neighbors who enjoyed learning, who bestowed personal admiration for learning, who tutored children to enhance learning, or who were successful by virtue of learning. Today, more children enter our public schools with less of these precious resources.

By the way, many people who deplore paying children for learning are quite proud to talk of their children winning college scholarships or graduate or professional-school fellowships. When I note that they are bragging about their children being paid for learning, they respond that these honors were based on merit. But what determined that merit? Substantial portions of meritorious behavior are determined by social conditions that are not available to inner-city children.

I have been told that children should learn for the love of learning. This, of course, is essentially what J's principal told me. Maimonides, in proposing his own pay-for-learning system, faced a similar challenge. He was told that children should study Torah because it is the word of God whom they should love. In turn he asked, how are the many adults who obey Scripture because of the promise of reward unlike children who read because of figs? To be sure Maimonides deplored the use of rewards to motivate learning but he saw no other way of bringing children or non-believers to study Torah.

I have been told that pay for learning will foster materialism. The

amount of money to effectively motivate learning, however, will not be large. For example, one dollar daily per eighth grader may be sufficient. Moreover, money can motivate learning non-materialistic lessons concerned with, for example, friendship, charity, or the rewards intrinsic to a contemplative life.

I have been told that many children will spend their earnings on drugs or that children will be "shaken down." Children who experiment with drugs, however, will discover that drugs interfere with learning and reduce earnings. These reductions ought to deter many such students from continued experimentation. But the lure of drugs or other rewards will tempt some students to access money through guile, theft, or extortion. Many of the social inventions that help adults such as direct bank deposits can help children. Furthermore, we should recognize that realistic learning objectives will permit the vast majority of children to legitimately earn rewards. Nevertheless, these are difficult problems which are neither unique to inner-city schools nor have stopped adults from being paid for their labor!

Pay for learning is not just for under-motivated, inner-city children. For example, our son, Noah, attended a Jewish day school. The school building is new and spacious, the staff is competent, the vast majority of parents are at least from the middle-class, and there are no more than 18 children assigned to a teacher.

My wife and I had many times told Noah that we consider his learning Hebrew important. We read prayers in Hebrew and I am always happy to speak with Noah in Hebrew. Nevertheless, we were informed, several springs ago, that Noah had trouble reading Hebrew. We then had a serious talk with him about how he would have to read Hebrew for fifteen minutes daily, during the summer, to improve his reading.

Summer came but Noah repeatedly put off the reading sessions. When one was scheduled he read slowly, responded poorly to constructive feedback, and just about went on strike as had J! So, we tried pay for learning. I counted the number of words Noah read correctly and the number of errors while he read Torah for fifteen minutes daily. I also corrected errors. When Noah read 35 words correctly per minute with less than one error per minute I agreed to pay for one-half of something Noah very much wanted--a computer.

The first sessions under the contract were painful. Noah read only about ten words correctly per minute with about two errors per minute. He angrily noted that it had taken me 46 years to read 35 words per minute and that, therefore, the goal was unreasonable. When he cried and refused to read I simply kept the watch running. His complaining to my wife only resulted in his being told that he was wasting time. Gradually the emotional behavior subsided and his

reading improved. He would then often ask to read twice a day. Within 12 sessions he was reading 20 words per minute. Within 20 sessions--a total of five hours--he had achieved the goal he had previously thought unattainable.

Not surprisingly, many students at Noah's school grudgingly learn Hebrew. I asked Noah's teacher about his attitude toward Hebrew. She said that she had made an "arrangement." Although I was relieved that she had not said "I consider it a big win whenever I can teach one child Hebrew," I was afraid to ask about the "arrangement." Several weeks later, I approached the same teacher and described pay for learning. She initially was expressionless. When I mentioned that Maimonides had used it for teaching Hebrew and Judaica, a small smile appeared. When I next asked if she would use the approach if it were approved by the principal and the school board, she smiled broadly. I, of course, don't know if she smiled because she thought I was "crazy" or she thought about the delight of teaching highly motivated students, but certainly it was not because she was already using pay for learning.

The idea of paying students for learning is at least 700 years old and its effectiveness is now backed-up by substantial research. Psychologists and other professionals regularly and effectively use behavioral contracting to enhance the learning of under-motivated, affluent children. With a behavioral contract in place, these children come to work in school not so much to earn money but to enjoy special activities with their parents.

But what about under-motivated, economically and often socially impoverished children? Although other improvements can be made in our public schools, I doubt that there is another, single, practicable approach that could more enhance the quality of education. In its simplest terms pay for learning promotes relations between work and reward characteristic of responsible adult life. This work, unlike much adult work, will result in inner-city children acquiring new capabilities, values, and perspectives. If we do not want to implement pay for learning for the sake of these children, then let us implement it, with our tax dollars, for the sake of our nation.