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Earning by Learning: Changing Attitudes and Habits in Reading

George W. McNinch

Parents and teachers are constantly striving to find ways to motivate children to read. Teachers (Veenman, 1984) ranked the motivation of students as one of their overriding concerns when asked about improving reading. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, et al., 1985), a truly seminal work on how to build a literate society, suggests that building motivation is an essential step in developing children who will turn into readers. The key question facing parents and teachers is how to motivate youngsters, especially at-risk children, to become active engaged readers. One answer to this question of motivation is a national program that pays children to read (Meyer, 1995).

Earning by Learning (EBL) (Johnson, 1995) is a unique program designed to increase the reading attitudes of academically at-risk children by combining two strong motivational factors: cash rewards and adult attention and approval. Children are encouraged and guided to read. For each book read, a cash award is given. These awards are typically made at the end of the program and the amounts earned vary with each individual based upon the number of books read.

Using rewards is a common educational practice to enhance motivation and thus keep children persevering at a task. While intrinsic rewards are usually argued as the best means for increasing involvement in reading, extrinsic rewards are sometimes more important and useful for groups whose inward motivation decreases with age or academic frustration (Oldfather, 1995). Schunk (1983) found that offering children a tangible, extrinsic reward promotes motivation and task performance. When tied to actual accomplishments, rewards can also enhance self-efficacy more than a no reward situation. As children work and succeed, motivation is increased and a cycle of support is sustained (Schunk, 1984).

External rewards can also supplement and build students' intrinsic motivation if the message of the extrinsic events is perceived as having personal value. Competence, or successful task completion, is one type of school activity that can make children feel good about themselves and increase feelings of self-esteem (Terrell and Rendulic, 1996). Higher motivation is achieved when children experience these positive feelings of self-esteem (Terrell & Rendulic, 1996). Accordingly, it appears that external rewards may be useful in increasing the frequency of reading because they increase the likelihood of successful task completion, i.e., finishing more books.

Questions

While there is logic and research to support the idea that motivation to read can be improved by offering at-risk children extrinsic rewards to supplement intrinsic motivation, specific questions must be asked about Earning by Learning: 1) Will the cash rewards of the EBL program motivate children to read? 2) Will the cash rewards of the EBL program change children's attitudes toward reading? 3) Will the cash rewards

of the EBL program change children's school behaviors in a positive direction?

Methods

To answer the questions about the success of the EBL program, one program site in a western Georgia small town was chosen for study and analysis. The EBL program was a daily half-day summer school experience located in a cooperating elementary school that provided rooms and volunteer adult support and supervision. The EBL program extended through six weeks of the summer vacation period and was staffed with a volunteer teacher and other adult volunteers who helped in book selection, reading attempts, discussions, and reports. Both school and local libraries were accessible to the program children. Volunteers drove the children to the local library on an almost daily basis. During the school day, children read books and completed informal activities such as retelling and dramatizing to demonstrate their mastery. EBL activities included not only these reading and discussion activities, but time for play, snacks, and other nonacademic school experiences where the EBL pupils mixed with other summer school children. Children were also encouraged to continue their reading at home and to share their at-home, independent reading experiences with the volunteers. Records were kept by the volunteers as to books read and the children's earning charts were posted and kept current in the rooms.

Selection for the summer program was completed in the spring prior to the formal end of the school year. At-risk second and third grade children were nominated by their teachers who considered erratic school attendance, low grades, low family income, little sibling success, and low rates of school library use as at-risk indicators. Twenty children participated in the summer program and were used as the study subjects. All

selected pupils had been in a kindergarten program. Nine of the pupils lived in two parent households while 11 lived in other arrangements. The mean reading percentile of the sample on a system administered standardized reading test was 19.45. Two of the students had been previously retained in a grade. The socioeconomic status of the represented families was in the bottom third. In summary, the sample chosen was at-risk and judged by their teachers as not likely to participate in recreational reading activities at home during the summer vacation.

Results

Question 1: Will the cash rewards of the EBL program motivate children to read? During the six weeks of the voluntary summer reading program, even though some children had several absences, the 20 children read a total of 829 books. All children read multiple books with the top reader completing a total of 56 books (a total award of \$112). The least number of books read by a child was 15 (an earned award of \$30). The EBL reward, a cash award of \$2.00 per book, for the group was \$1,658 divided among the summer readers. The children did appear to be influenced by the extrinsic motivation and were truly earning by learning. On the basis of the number of books completed, the EBL program was successful in getting at-risk children, not usually thought of as readers, to read and read continuously during the summer program.

Question 2: Will the cash rewards of the EBL program change children's attitudes toward reading? Reading attitude was measured by the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna and Kear, 1990) employed in a pre/post test situation. The attitude scale is a self reporting questionnaire of 20 questions in a Likert format using Garfield faces ranging from 4 (very happy) to 1 (very upset). The first 10 items on the scale reflect attitudes toward recreational reading while the final 10

items focus on attitudes toward academic reading. These two scores are added to produce a total.

Overall change in attitude was evaluated by comparing the total pretest with the total post test results on the attitude survey. The mean response on the attitude pretest was 2.8 (neutral) at the beginning of the summer program. After the completion of the voluntary summer reading program and its financial cash rewards for reading, the mean response to the attitude survey was 3.1 (mildly excited). The dependent one-tailed t -test ratio ($t = 1.8, p < .05$) indicated that the pretest and post test attitude scores were significantly different from each other. The pupils' total attitude toward reading changed positively during the cash incentive program. A voluntary summer reading program for at-risk elementary pupils that uses cash rewards as extrinsic motivators seems to be effective in changing overall attitude toward reading.

Recreational reading attitude as represented by the first 10 items on the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* was also compared. The mean recreational reading response was 3.0 (mildly positive) at the beginning of the program. The post test mean recreational response from the end of the summer program was 3.1 (mildly positive), a slight but significant increase. The dependent one-tailed t -test ratio ($t = -1.9, p < .05$) indicated that these means were significantly different. The children's measured attitude toward recreational reading changed positively during the summer program that rewarded book reading with cash rewards. EBL may be useful in changing attitude toward recreational reading in at-risk groups of young children.

Academic reading attitude, comprising the last 10 items on the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*, was the research variable in the third analysis. Mean academic reading attitude

was 2.8 (neutral) at the beginning of the summer EBL program. This mean response was the lowest of all the measured variables and indicated that pupils had a low attitude toward reading in the school situation. After the voluntary summer reading program and its rewards for recreational reading, the mean response toward academic reading changed to 3.0 (mildly positive). However, this difference was not statistically significant ($t = -1.7$, $p = .06$), due to the degree of variance in the scores. Pupils' attitude did move toward a higher level and ended with a moderately positive response to the academic items on the survey. Some at-risk students need a different, perhaps more intensive, program to enhance change in attitude toward academic reading. Perhaps academic attitudes might also be improved more if the monetary rewards were extended for a longer time period and implemented in the regular school setting.

Question 3: Will the cash rewards of the EBL program change children's school behaviors in a positive direction? This question was investigated during the school year following the summer program. Teachers of EBL participants completed a performance assessment four months into the school year focusing on the school and reading habits of the EBL pupils in their classes. The teacher survey of pupil habits addressed the following areas: improved self-esteem, rise in overall school grades, rise in reading levels, and improved school attitude. The percentages in the following table indicate that the teachers perceived that the EBL program impacted the children in a most positive manner. Rewarding children for reading changed both their literacy performance and their general school habits.

<u>Observed Characteristic</u>	<u>% of Teachers Noticing Change</u>
improved self-esteem	84%
rise in overall school grades	72%
rise in reading levels	63%
improved school attitude	86%

Discussion

Extrinsic motivational techniques are important to any reading program. They are useful in increasing reading participation and encouraging at-risk children to read. The Earning by Learning approach to motivation, using cash awards at the end of a voluntary program, appears to be successful in increasing the quantity of books that at-risk children read. The answer to the question posed by Sax and Kohn (1996) then, "Should we pay children to learn," appears to be a supportive "Yes." The frequency and amount of reading, as well as the attitudes toward recreational reading, of at-risk elementary pupils challenged in a summer program can be significantly increased by incentives based on financial gain. The EBL program, like other successful summer enrichment programs, immerses the children in a school based supportive, success filled environment well stocked with books and other reading materials. Books are read, shared, discussed, and traded in the context of friendly, structured events. Even though the intrinsic rewards that grow out of success and achievement obviously play a part in the success of the EBL program, it does appear that cash awards may be strong extrinsic motivators for encouraging frequent and sustained reading.

In at-risk populations, the keys to encouraging an optimal student response to literature and reading are self-selection and the use of extrinsic motivators (White and Greenwood, 1995). EBL seems to satisfy both of these policy

recommendations. The EBL program, in its short summer duration, was successful in significantly changing attitudes in two (total and recreational) of the three affective areas measured by the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*. EBL's success in recreational reading attitude is straightforward as this measured skill is reflective of the successful program. Total change toward reading, a more positive attitude, was also expected as the program and its rewards placed a high, positive value on books and book reading in a supportive adult guided environment. However, unlike the positive changes in overall and recreational reading attitude, no significant changes were noted in academic reading attitude. The very negative attitudes of two at-risk pupils on the attitude survey may have been enough to depress the entire sample in this area. Perhaps students with very negative self-reported attitudes toward school and reading may need a longer more supportive program, more than just rewards, to effect change.

Frequent book reading, increased attitude, and increased positive school behaviors, the three successes of the program, seem to paint a positive, endorsing portrait of Earning by Learning. Immersing children in a book rich environment, staffed by caring volunteers, and rewarding reading with cash incentives seems at least in the short run to make readers and more successful students out of at-risk children.

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