EDUC 450: Inquiry Project Proposal

Inquiry Question:

**How does the implementation of extrinsic reward systems affect motivation and learning in students?**

For my inquiry project, I am curious in investigating how extrinsic reward systems affect the learning process in classrooms. Specifically, I intend to examine how extrinsic rewards such as marks or report cards may influence a student’s intrinsic motivation for learning. As educators, we frequently discuss how to best foster qualities in students which embody that of a life-long learner. We want our students to be excited at the opportunity to learn instead of being motivated to learn solely so that they can get a good mark.

Throughout my practicum, I could not help but notice how students continually asked questions regarding when they would receive their marked tests back. Evidently, they wanted to know how they did on their tests. After receiving their marked tests back, the majority of the students would solely look at the mark they received at the front of the page. Being in the Primary Years Programme (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate, the organization’s mission statement embraces the stance of encouraging students to become life-long learners. However, if students are so engrossed in simply getting the marks back on their tests, are they embodying the traits of a life-long learner? How does their learning being validated by a mark or other external reward systems affect any intrinsic motivation for learning they possess? I wonder if it is necessarily a negative characteristic for students to be motivated in their learning in part by the grade they receive on assignments, tests, or a report card. After all, just because students are interested in their grades it may not equate to students not having an intrinsic motivation to learn. In fact, having extrinsic reward systems are often useful in motivating students to actively participate in the classroom. Thus, I was interested in further exploring the relationship of extrinsic reward systems with student’s intrinsic motivation for learning.

**Significance**

The shift towards a student-centered and inquiry-based approach is a rhetoric often repeated in current education circles. Being in newly created IB cohort, an inquiry-based approach is fundamental to its holistic, transdisciplinary philosophy to learning. Additionally, one only needs to look at the main page of the UBC education department to see the strong presence of the word inquire. Among this shift, often coined among many buzzwords such as 21st century learning, a principal component involves recognizing that all students learn differently and consequently their learning must be personalized. In other words, we want students to bring their own interests and prior knowledge into the classroom in order to create an enriching learning environment. Thus, through providing authentic learning opportunities we are encouraging students to develop a natural love for learning and embodying the attributes of a life-long learner.

Admittedly, it becomes apparent that developing a student’s intrinsic motivation to learn is a critical objective. If a student is to become a natural inquirer of the world outside the classroom, then I argue that the inquiry mindset must manifest itself without the need for an extrinsic reward constantly validating their experience. Are the students being authentic inquirers if that reward at the end of the line is always present? It is important to consider how our current external reward systems of report cards and marks may be inhibiting a student from embodying the attributes of an inquirer. When it comes down to it, the marks and the grades seem to be what matters and hold authority in our current system. Does constantly validating a students learning through marks and report cards constrain or obstruct their becoming inquirers?

Whenever possible, we want students to have a choice in how they learn and where they are going with their learning. In fact, as stated by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser in *Spirals of Inquiry*, it is indispensable for students to reflect on where they are going with their learning, how they are doing with their learning, and where they are going next with their learning. We must put the responsibility on the students to naturally inquire about their environment, reflect, and validate their own learning. Thus, as educators, it is important to question what kinds of strategies would best foster these actions and reflect on what may need to change as a result. There is already a growing discourse emerging which challenges the current report card system in British Columbia. Current Superintendent of Schools in the West Vancouver School District, Chris Kennedy, has written a recent blog entry, titled *The Year of The Report Card,* which adds to this emerging discourse. He points out that in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows, the school board has approved an alternate reporting option which emphasizes student self-assessment. Through investigating how external reward systems such as marks and report cards affect student learning and motivation, I hope to contribute insight towards the discourse involving finding a method of assessment that better reflects the current shift in education.

**My Perspective**

I recognize that the perspective I bring to the subject matter is inherently and unescapably subjective. My approach and reasoning in the inquiry project will be influenced not by some objective knowledge I possess, but rather through a storied knowledge. Thus, it is important to acknowledge and recognize the viewpoint through which I approach the subject.

Having lived mainly in British Columbia and experiencing a school system which consisted of grades and report cards, I remember my main focus throughout school was the grade. Other than getting a good grade, any other purpose for my learning was often a forgotten aspect of my experience through elementary and high school. In so doing, I recognize I must be careful of unfairly equating the experience of my students in school with my own experience. Just because my motivation for learning focused upon extrinsic rewards and validation, it may not be a main motivating factor for students in my classroom. Being a current teacher candidate enrolled in the elementary option and part of the IB cohort, I must recognize that I am situated within a unique space. The inferences I make throughout my investigation of the subject will be largely based on theory encountered from seminars and journal articles, and on my observations of Grade 6 and 7 students enrolled at West Bay Elementary which offers the IB PYP. How might student motivation for learning be different in lower grades, outside of the PYP, or outside of an urban setting?

**Resources**

For the inquiry project, I will draw upon my seminar discussions, research papers, and experiences from my practicum. First, it will be important to define the notion of extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards. Is there a clear boundary? It will be important to draw upon theories which define the notion of extrinsic and intrinsic; thereby providing context in arguing towards a desire for intrinsic motivation in students. Looking forward, I have already gathered a body of research papers which investigate the effects of extrinsic/intrinsic rewards in the classroom. Through analyzing the research papers, insight on the academic viewpoints of the effect of external rewards and student motivation can be established.

In order to bring relevance to my inquiry project to the education system in British Columbia, I will specifically focus on external reward systems in the BC education system such as report cards. Thus, the assessment course at UBC which I will take next term will be a valuable resource to draw upon. I also hope to examine the situation at Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows in order to gain insight on how their recent change in the report card system has affected student learning. In regards to my practicum, I aim to practice different assessment strategies that do not emphasize extrinsic rewards in order to assess its effect on my students’ learning and motivation. Lastly, through discussion with my School Advisor of my inquiry project, I will gain a valuable perspective deepened from practical experience.

Preliminary Research Papers:

Akin-Little, K. Angeleque, et al. "Extrinsic Reinforcement in the Classroom: Bribery Or

Best Practice." *School Psychology Review* 33.3 (2004): 344-62. Print.

Gottfried, Adele Eskeles. "Academic Intrinsic Motivation in Young Elementary School

Children." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 82.3 (1990): 525-38. Print.

Haywood, Joey, et al. "Increasing Elementary and High School Student Motivation

through the use of Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards." 2008. Print.

Schaps, Eric, and Catherine Lewis. *Extrinsic Rewards are Education's Past, Not its*

*Future*. 48 Vol. , 1991. Print.

Workman, Edward A., and Robert L. Williams. "Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on

Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom."*Journal of School Psychology* 18.2 (1980): 141-7. Print.

**Future Pathways**

As alluded to earlier, I anticipate my inquiry project will lead me to experimenting with different assessment strategies, specifically student self-assessment, during my practicum. The examination will be situated within the lens of how a change in extrinsic reward system affects student motivation and learning. Through examining the effectiveness of extrinsic reward systems, I expect it may lead to critically examining whether the current report card system in BC is in need of a change in order to create a healthier learning environment for students. How can educators adapt their pedagogy in terms of extrinsic reward systems in order to nurture students’ intrinsic motivation for learning? This question may lead me to examine assessment strategies which may better be suited for encouraging an inquiry-based learning environment. Perhaps a growing trend will develop which follows the lead of the schools in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows. Ultimately, the insight gained from the project will benefit my future practice and fellow teacher candidates through its valuable contribution towards the discourse surrounding the report card system in BC. In so doing, strategies for fostering student inquiry and the qualities of a life-long learner may be supplemented.