Group Reward Programs: A Humanistic Approach

By: Craig S. Cashwell, C. H. Skinner, M. Dunn, and J. Lewis

*** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document

Abstract:
Education at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. Historically, some educators and counselors have perceived that behavioral contingencies are antithetical to a humanistic approach to education. Negative side effects and limitations of dependent and independent group reward programs are described and examined from a humanistic perspective. Interdependent group rewards are discussed as a humanistic alternative and specific recommendations for applying these programs are provided.

Article:
Contingency management programs, defined as the use of consequences (i.e., rewards and punishments to change the frequency of specific behaviors (Bootzin & Acocella, 1984), are often used by people who work with groups of students. Although group reward programs have been shown to be effective, these programs are underused in most educational environments (Englemann, 1991). Lack of training and misconceptions about the philosophy and negative side effects of contingencies may account for the underuse of contingency management in education environments (Pumroy & McIntire, 1991). Specifically, many educators and counselors may not realize how group reward programs, when used correctly, are consistent with humanistic philosophy and goals (Slavin, 1987; Watson, 1994).

One misperception about group contingency programs is that their sole purpose is to eradicate inappropriate behavior (O'Leary, Poulos, & Devine, 1972). For some professionals, the perception is that group reward programs control, rather than empower, students. However, group contingency programs (i.e., group reward programs) also can be used to encourage prosocial behavior and a respect for diversity. The purpose of this article is to provide a humanistic perspective on three types of group oriented reward programs that counselors and educators can implement, with an emphasis on strengths and limitations of each approach. When used correctly, such reward programs are consistent with humanistic ideology. With a better understanding of the positive and negative side-effects of the three types of group oriented reward programs, educators and counselors may be able to enhance their service delivery (Gresham & Gresham, 1982).

CASE EXAMPLE
Ms. Smith, a 7th-grade teacher, plans an educational field trip for her class to be taken in 4 weeks. She plans to involve the students in the planning of the trip as an additional educational activity. In addition, Ms. Smith wants to set up the trip as a reward for increased prosocial behavior in the classroom. There are numerous ways in which Ms. Smith might set up this reward program.

TYPES OF GROUP ORIENTED REWARDS
The three primary types of group oriented reward programs are independent, dependent, and interdependent group reward programs (Litow & Pumroy, 1975). From a humanistic perspective, independent and dependent group reward programs have some limitations and interdependent group programs are more consistent with a humanistic ideation (Slavin, 1987). After examining the limitations of independent and dependent group reward programs, specific recommendations for using interdependent group reward programs are provided.

Independent Group Rewards

Independent group oriented rewards are the rewards most often used in educational settings, often due to the lack of knowledge concerning alternatives (Watson, 1994). In this type of group reward program, individual students receive access to the same rewards based on meeting the same criteria. These programs are group oriented because all students have common target behaviors and criteria and receive access to the same rewards. These programs are considered independent because only students who meet common criteria receive the reward (Litow & Pumroy, 1975). Because target behaviors, criteria, and rewards are identical for all students, these programs are easy to manage and are considered fair by students (Turco & Elliott, 1990).

If Ms. Smith were to use an independent group reward program, she might establish a contingency where only students who did not fight during the 4-week period before the trip would be allowed to participate. This is a group reward because each student has the same target behaviors (no fighting), criteria for earning rewards (zero levels for 4 weeks), and reward (participate in the field trip). The reward program is considered independent and fair because each student earns access to the reward contingent upon her or his own behavior (Turco & Elliott, 1990). However, independent group rewards can cause social-emotional problems and have practical, legal, and ethical limitations, as noted later in this article (Skinner, Cashwell, & Dunn, 1996).

Limitations of Group Rewards

Independent group rewards may promote a social class system in schools. Some students get access to rewards and other students whose academic performance and social behavior are below set criteria do not. Because being a member of a peer group is important, those who tend not to earn rewards may form their own group where members praise and socially reward each other's inappropriate behaviors. Inclusion in such a group may lead to increased behavior problems (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996).

Independent group rewards also can lead to sabotage (Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969; Turco & Elliott, 1990). When rewards are earned (or lost) independently based on behaviors that require two or more people (e.g., fighting), one student can set up another. For example, one student may pick a fight with another student. This is even more likely if the reward is not attractive to one student. Independent group rewards also can cause problems when students are informed that they can no longer earn a reward. Students may create problems in the classroom after being told that they will not participate in the class outing (Skinner et al., 1996).

Finally, when using independent group contingencies with educational activity rewards, students with behavioral or emotional disabilities may be denied an educational opportunity based solely on their disability. Such practice is illegal (Jacob-Timm & Hartshorne, 1994). Furthermore, students who were not allowed to go on the field trip because they fought may have benefited from the learning experience the field trip was designed to provide. Therefore, even when excluding children from educational activities is legal, denying students important educational experiences is inconsistent with humanistic practices.

Dependent Group Rewards

A dependent group oriented reward is one in which the reward is given to the group based on the criteria being met by one member or portion of the total group. These programs are considered dependent because students can only receive a reward based on the performance of someone else (Bear & Richards, 1980). The advantages that dependent reward programs have over independent reward programs can include more group cohesion, lack of competition between students, increased support from peers for target behavior as well as censure for inappropriate behavior, increased peer relatedness, and a decline in disruptive behavior (Gresham & Gresham, 1982). If Ms. Smith wanted to decrease the combative behavior of one student in her class, she might tell the class that they will only be allowed to participate in the field trip if that particular student is not involved in any fights.

Drawbacks of Dependent Group Oriented Rewards

In addition to many of the same practical, legal, and ethical problems that may occur with independent group rewards, dependent group rewards also may create additional problems because individual students are

identified and pressured to meet goals. When rewards are earned, students may be likely to provide positive social reinforcement to the target student. However, when target students fail to meet the goals, this type of contingency may increase the probability of peer threats, punishment, or social exclusion of the target student. Often, dependent group rewards are not considered fair because all students are not being required to meet the same criteria. Peers are likely to consider these contingencies unfair, particularly when they perform or behave in an exceptional manner but do not receive the reward because of one student. Therefore, dependent group contingencies must be used with extreme caution because they can occasion antisocial behaviors among classmates, and students feel that they are being treated unfairly.

Interdependent Group Rewards
One solution to some of these problems may be to establish interdependent group rewards. When interdependent group oriented rewards are used, the entire class is allowed access to rewards contingent on some aspect of group behavior (Turco & Elliott, 1990). Averages (e.g., class average of 90% on a test), minimums (e.g., all must attend at least four out of five group counseling sessions), highs (any three students in a group have no reported behavioral problems), and other group oriented criterion levels can be set by the teacher or counselor and either all or none of the group receives access to the reward based on group behavior or performance. If Ms. Smith were using an interdependent group reward to influence an increase in prosocial behavior in the classroom, she might establish a priori that students will attend the field trip if there are no more than two fights in the classroom in the 4 weeks preceding the trip.

Advantages of Interdependent Group Rewards
Using interdependent group rewards may reduce several limitations associated with independent group oriented rewards. Because everyone in the group either receives access or does not receive access to rewards, interdependent group rewards do not establish a class system within the group based on receiving or not receiving rewards (Skinner et al., 1996; Theobald, 1992). Furthermore, because students tend to form social peer groups based on common characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status, providing a common goal may increase acceptance, understanding, and cooperation among diverse students. By giving everyone in the group a common goal, interdependent group rewards may increase prosocial cooperative behaviors, sharing of resources, and social contacts among students (Gresham & Gresham, 1982; Slavin, 1987; Speltz, Shimamura, & McReynolds, 1982). With interdependent group rewards, as with dependent group rewards, it is much easier for school personnel to manage the delivery of rewards. For example, when activity rewards are earned, other staff are not needed to supervise students who did not earn the rewards. When tangible rewards are used, it is easier to deliver these rewards to all, rather than some, of the group.

Using interdependent group rewards does raise some concerns. As with dependent group rewards, when an interdependent group reward is used and an entire group of students is told that they did not earn the reward, the entire group may have a negative reaction. Students who are meeting expectations and behaving well may become more upset because they may perceive that they are being punished for other students' behavior (Stewart & McLaughlin, 1986). Furthermore, students may vent their frustrations toward the student or group of students who caused them to fail to earn their rewards (Hayes, 1976). Many of these problems left unresolved by the interdependent group oriented rewards can be reduced by randomizing program components (Skinner & Watson, 1995), thereby creating a more humanistic educational environment.

Randomized Interdependent Group Reward Components
By randomizing reward program components, interdependent group oriented rewards may be further strengthened. Skinner and Watson (1995) described reward lottery procedures where rewards, criteria, and target behaviors are selected randomly. Few materials and little time are needed to conduct these lotteries. For example, counselors or teachers can use two paper sacks labeled "rewards" and "target behaviors and criteria." Slips of paper with a group reward written on them are contained in one sack. The rewards (including activities) and target behaviors and criteria can be generated collaboratively with students. Immediate rewards, such as playing music during seat work, should be included. However, more desirable rewards that cannot be delivered immediately also can be included (e.g., field trips). The sack labeled "target behaviors and criteria" would

contain slips of paper with phrases such as "90% average on mathematics test" or "80% complete homework assignment" written on them.

Through randomization of target behaviors and criteria in the classroom, students are always affected by the reward program. Therefore, if a slip of paper labeled "all homework completed" is drawn, the teacher looks at the last homework assignment records to determine if the group met the criteria. If the class met the randomly selected criteria, the teacher announces the criteria, announces that the class has met the criteria, and then draws or has a student draw a reward from the other sack. If the class failed to meet the criteria, no reward would be drawn.

With this reward lottery, antecedent conditions are changed because students are no longer working for a specific reward (Slavin, 1987). Therefore, students may be less likely to sabotage a program because they do not like a reward or have strong emotional reactions when they fail to earn a very powerful reward because they have no previous knowledge of the specific reward.

For the reward program to be more effective, younger students may need to be reminded of the reward lottery. Structural reminders include keeping the lottery materials in view (e.g., keep the sacks on the teacher's desk) or posting available rewards on a bulletin board. Activity reminders include having the group add to the "rewards" bag and adjusting the criteria and target behaviors frequently. These activities and structural changes should make interdependent group oriented rewards more effective and more salient (Nelson & Hayes, 1981). It also may help to make a big production over the drawings. When a criterion has been met, allowing a student in need of positive social attention to draw the reward may serve as a social reward.

AVOIDING DIFFICULTIES
To avoid problems that may arise from interdependent reward programs, there are several important guidelines to follow:

1. Use interdependent group-oriented procedures for rewards only. Using interdependent group oriented procedures for punishment is likely to be perceived as extremely unfair and will create behavioral and emotional problems in the classroom.

2. After drawing "target behaviors and criteria" from the sack, do not select rewards unless it has been determined that they were earned (Skinner & Watson, 1995). This will reduce the amount of blame placed on a student or group of students whose performance or behavior reduced the probability of the group earning a particular reward.

3. Randomize the timing of the lottery drawings. Students may be less likely to misbehave when they do not earn the group reward if they are reminded that another drawing may be forthcoming (Stokes & Baer, 1977).

4. It may be appropriate at times to conduct drawings following some exceptional performance by the group or a particular student. This system encourages students to reward the positive behaviors of peers. In addition, students may be encouraged to report these positive behaviors, as opposed to tattling.

ALTERING THE SYSTEM
The reward system can be altered based on developmental considerations or student progress. Before establishing group reward programs, some developmental issues must be considered. Younger students may respond to rewards that can be given immediately, and older students may respond better to more powerful but delayed rewards. Also, younger students may respond better if very few behaviors are targeted.

As student behaviors begin to improve, additional target behaviors can be included. Furthermore, as students begin to respond to immediate rewards, they can be taught to respond to delayed rewards by including more powerful rewards that take time to plan and deliver. In addition, only high priority behaviors and criteria can be

included in the containers. As students master those behaviors, other behaviors can be added. Also, specific behaviors can be shaped by changing the criteria. For example, slips that say "70%-80% average on spelling test" can later be replaced with slips of paper that establish higher criteria (e.g., 80%-90%).

CONCLUSION

Although some people might argue that a drawback of interdependent group rewards is that students who have performed poorly may receive rewards, we consider this a strength. Some students do not find school to be enjoyable because they rarely earn rewards in school environments due to the over-reliance on independent group rewards.

Because randomized interdependent group reward programs are time and resource efficient, teachers and counselors may find that these programs allow them to increase appropriate student behavior in the classroom. However, because target behaviors, criteria, and rewards are not established a priori, these randomized interdependent reward programs may not be as powerful as individual or independent group contingency programs. Therefore, the programs should never be used in isolation. Rather, the interdependent group reward programs approach and other humanistic procedures allow teachers and counselors to occasion, reward, and influence appropriate, cooperative prosocial behaviors among diverse student populations.

REFERENCES

Barrish, H. H., Saunders, M., & Wolf, M. M. (1969). Good behavior game: Effects of individual contingencies for group behavior in a classroom. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 2, 119-124.

Bear, G. G., & Richards, H. C. (1980). An interdependent group-oriented contingency system for improving academic performance. School Psychology Review, 9, 119-224.

Bootzin, R. R., & Acocella, J. R. (1984). Abnormal psychology: Current perspectives. New York: Random House.

Cashwell, C. S., & Vacc, N. A. (1996). Family functioning and risk behavior : Influences on adolescent delinquency. The School Counselor, 44, 105-114.

Englemann, S. (1991). Change schools through revolution, not evolution, Journal of Behavioral Education, I, 295-304.

Gresham, F. M., & Gresham, G. N. (1982). Interdependent, dependent, and independent group contingencies for controlling disruptive behavior. The Journal of Special Education, 16, 101-110.

Hayes, L. A. (1976). The use of group contingencies for behavior control: A review. Psychological Bulletin, 83, 628-648.

Jacob-Timm, S., & Hartshorne, T. (1994). Ethics and law for school psychologists. Brandon, VT: Clinical Psychology.

Litow, L., & Pumroy, D. K. (1975). A brief review of classroom group oriented contingencies. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 8, 341-347.

Nelson, R. O., & Hayes, S. C. (1981). Theoretical explanations of reactivity in self-monitoring. Behavior Modification, 5, 2-14.

O'Leary, K. D., Poulos, R. W., & Devince, V. T. (1972). Tangible reinforcers: Bonuses or brides. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 38, 1-8.

Pumroy, D. K., & McIntire, R. (1991). Behavior analysis/modification for everyone. Journal of Behavioral Education, 1, 283-294.

Skinner, C. H., Cashwell, C. S., & Dunn, M. (1996). Independent and interdependent group contingencies: Smoothing the rough waters. Special Services in the Schools, 12, 61-78.

Skinner, C. H., & Watson, T. S. (1995). Lotteries in the classroom. Legends, 15, 2-3.

Slavin, R. E. (1987). Cooperative learning: Where behavioral and humanistic approaches to classroom management meet. The Elementary School Journal, 88, 29-37.

Speltz, M. L., Shimamura, J. W., & McReynolds, W. T. (1982). Procedural variations in group contingencies: Effects on children's academic and social behaviors. Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis, 15, 533-544.

Stewart, J. P., & McLaughlin, T. F. (1986). Effects of group and individual contingencies on reading performance with Native American junior high school students. Techniques: A Journal for Remedial Education and Counseling, 2, 133-144.

Stokes, T. F., & Baer, D. M. (1977). An implicit technology of generalization. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 10, 349-367.

Theobald, P. (1992). The concept of place in the new sociology of education. Education of Foundations, 6, 5-19.

Turco, T. L., & Elliott, S. N. (199). Acceptability and effectiveness of group contingencies for improving spelling achievement. Journal of School Psychology, 28, 27-37.

Watson, T. S. (1994). The role of preservice education in training teachers to serve behaviorally disordered children. Contemporary Education, 65, 128-131.