

Tinseltown values just ain't the way

John MacBeath asks us to rethink the 'Oscar for Teachers' idea (Platform, September 17). I think the good professor has been spending too much time mingling with the glitterati and has clearly, as he admitted himself, been seduced by the award occasion in London and perhaps almost by his own celebrity status.

In Scotland, the idea wasn't rejected as he suggests through some Calvinistic prejudice but from a rational understanding of what is important in life and what makes us tick. The pervading influence of the cult of celebrity and the politicisation of teaching was never more apparent to me than when I was listening to Lord Puttnam try to explain on Newsnight how the Oscars would inspire all teachers.

We really are in trouble if our politicians and educational gurus think that treating teachers like entertainers is the way ahead. One of my local head teachers was recently honoured with an MBE. Does anyone really think this was a life-long ambition and the driving force behind his life's work.

If you were lucky enough, winning an Oscar might be an uplifting experience. Maybe Oscars could promote a more upbeat image and balance the blanket criticisms coming from the constant talk of bad teachers. Such a prospect however won't raise teachers' motivation.

John MacBeath reminds us of the most important point, that achievement is context bound, within teams and schools. For that very reason the immediate peer group is the best judge and context for recognition. And I would like to broaden this to include the pupils' contribution.

I have been working recently with teachers on how they can encourage the best from their pupils. The soundbite answer is to give the best of themselves. With feelings of being undervalued and perceptions of ever changing and competing priorities go greater accountability, an increasingly prescribed curriculum and rising workload. All this comes within a competitive (league tables, best value) climate, where the emphasis is on the product rather than the process, and against a constant public debate about bad teachers. It is remarkable so many remain so enthusiastic.

While rewards are widely accepted in our schools as a powerful motivating tool, teachers know they only encourage if they are used properly. Any reward game should tell the players how to succeed. Theory and practice suggest several guiding principles, one of which is that everyone should be treated in a fair and equal way.

Rewards shouldn't be overemphasised beforehand or distract attention from the task itself. They are most effective when they form a genuine and natural part of a working relationship and are seen as sincere and earned.

Moderate but regular praise is much better than extravagant but infrequent praise. It is better to praise the work and so communicate its value rather than praise the individual and perhaps cause embarrassment.

Rewards should never be given at the expense of others. Most importantly, if encouraging everyone is the aim then they should not be distributed on a competitive basis. The ostentatious distribution of awards to the lucky few is not a strategy often used to inspire pupils.

Maybe Lord Puttnam should take a lead from the practitioners. Oscars might meet actors' need for public adulation but for the rest of us they hold little value. There are basically two ways to motivate others. From the outside, by threat of punishment or promise of reward. Or from the inside, by using people's positive states to draw them into the task, by providing the opportunities for achievement that will be motivating, by setting up the optimal conditions and by removing the constraints.

Motivation and self-esteem are inextricably linked and in fact self-motivation and self-esteem may be thought of as one and the same. Contexts that support self-esteem, maximise autonomy and initiative and minimise control are likely to lead to a healthy sense of self and to encourage the best form of motivation. In such a setting emphasis is given to an "improve yourself" rather than a "prove yourself" approach.

In such a climate people are encouraged to look for feedback and recognition so that they can continuously improve, not so that they can gain some self-enhancement. Excessive competition is avoided as it reduces work rate, damages confidence and encourages timidity. Most teachers have a natural tendency towards continuous improvement or mastery learning – that's what attracted them to the job. It would be ironic if teaching Oscars unwittingly undermined the number one priority of the Scottish Executive.

Lord Puttnam is confusing rewarding teachers for success with giving recognition for that success. There is a subtle difference between conditional rewards used to cajole people into doing what we want and encouragement which genuinely recognises efforts, to enhance motivation.

Most of us are motivated by a mixture of intrinsic rewards like satisfaction and extrinsic rewards like salary. It is only when such normal rewards are out of reach that artificial incentives can help kick-start an interest. Oscar winners by definition are the last people who need such a carrot.

Contrived rewards for already committed people may in fact damage intrinsic motivation. If we think rewards are manipulating us we may lose our sense of self-determination or simply feel insulted. Recognition on the other hand will always be encouraging. What teachers need is genuine recognition for their efforts, not a simplistic and patronising system of gimmicky rewards for a few chosen "15 minute" celebrities.

