

Action Research

Decreasing Acting-Out Behavior and Increasing Learning

Sharon Faith Schoen • Jen Nolen

Did I yell out?

Did I stay on-task?

Did I act respectfully to the other students and teachers?

Did I use proper outlets to calm down?

These are questions on a student's self-monitoring checklist that a teacher used to help the student control off-task behavior. The checklist is just one activity that successfully decreased negative behavior and promoted learning in this action research project. This article describes how the project helped one student with learning disabilities increase his positive behavior—and be more successful socially, behaviorally, and cognitively.

When teachers decide to explore a problem encountered in the classroom, such as a student's problem behavior, they need a systematic approach that incorporates analytic examination and continuous refinement of the teaching/learning process. Action research is just such an approach.

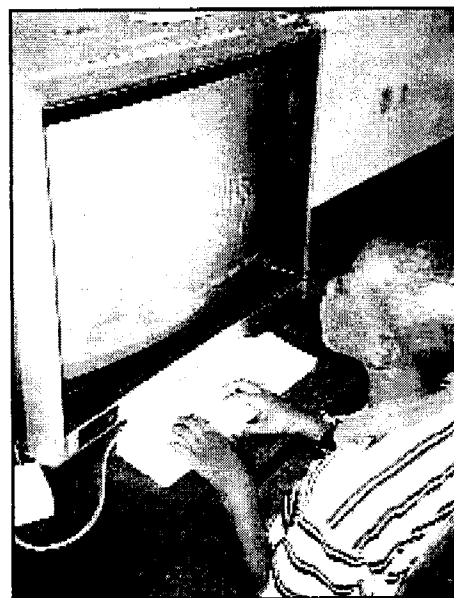
By definition, action research is founded on a commitment to improve the quality of life of others through critical reflection and inquiry (Archer, Holly, & Kasten, 2001; Johnson, A. P., 2003). The process evolves as teachers gather information about and reflect on their students' needs, abilities, and learning styles to enhance educational outcomes (Schoen & Bullard, 2002; Schoen & Schoen, 2003). Questioning,

assessing, exploring, researching, discussing, documenting, evaluating, monitoring, analyzing, refining, and revising become recursive aspects of the process.

Examining Acting-Out Behavior: An Action Research Project

The acting-out behavior of a sixth-grade male student who participated in general education and part-time special education classes involved a myriad of misbehaviors. Here is a brief example:

After entering the classroom, Edward threw his book bag down on the floor by his desk. Then, he wandered out into the hall. He returned and flicked a classmate on the back of the head. Edward sat in the back of the room, even though his assigned seat was in the front row. During the 30-minute lesson, Edward was off-task approximately 40% of the time. He spent 5 minutes secretly shooting rubber bands at peers. His giggling disrupted other surrounding students. Edward engaged Dominick in a game of paper football. The teacher asked Edward to leave. Edward's response was to shout, push desks, and stomp out of the room.



Four Steps to Better Behavior

The teacher and a researcher took deliberate steps, as follows, to diminish these types of interfering behaviors and enhance engagement in task activities.

Step 1: Framing the Question

Edward is a sixth-grader in a public, urban school. He participates in general education with pullout special education instruction in reading and math. The student is classified as learning disabled, and he currently resides in a foster care home.

Edward excels in the area of art and enjoys assisting classmates. When focused on his work, he completes tasks appropriately. Distractions in the class and reactions to peers, however, often precipitate acting-out behaviors. Obviously, such outbursts interfere with learning, both for Edward and his classmates. The problem necessitated thoughtful action.

Step 2: Collecting Data

We collected many kinds of data to inform decision making and action planning.

Observations and Interviews. Focused observations in the form of an

antecedent, behavior, consequence (ABC) analysis gleaned over a 5-day period clarified the problem behavior. Edward's acting-out behavior converged into patterns of misbehavior. These persistent patterns revealed categories of Edward's typical actions, including slamming materials, yelling at teacher/peers, muttering under his breath, storming out of the room, destroying his work, and tuning out (head down on the desk).

Interviews with the social worker, special education teacher, and student provided further insights about Edward. The social worker, assigned to Edward's case for 3 years, offered illuminating information. Edward was reportedly removed from his biological parent's home at the age of 9 due to neglect, violence, and maternal drug addiction. Edward had been placed in two foster care situations since that time. Several supplemental treatments were in place, including psychological counseling, behavior therapy, medication, and art therapy. The social worker strongly discouraged any use of punishment as consequences and encouraged the idea of self-regulation strategies.

The classroom teacher underscored the need to closely monitor the effects of the interventions. Developmentally, a 12-year-old boy may reject additional adult attention in the presence of his peers, wanting to conform to typical adult/child interactions in a classroom environment.

In addition, Edward himself noted that he viewed his behavior as problematic. An interest inventory disclosed several potential positive reinforcers for consideration. Specifically, Edward enjoys working in groups, engaging in hands-on projects, watching movies, eating pizza, and drawing.

Literature Review. We selected interventions from four different theoretical bases to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

Social learning theory places emphasis on learning through example. Modeling, or observing the responses of another person, can have as much effect as direct instruction (Grusec, 1992; Schoen, 1989). Teachers can foster such observational learning by modeling

expectations for their students, using peers to demonstrate desired behavior, or coupling competent learners in cooperative learning arrangements, for instance (Woolfolk, 1999).

Interviews with the social worker, special education teacher, and student provided insights about the student's behavior.

In Edward's case, vicarious learning held potential because we had observed him emulating peer behavior. Teachers should take care in selecting a peer model, so as not to diminish the teachers' influence. Dishion (1999) advised that peers provide a rate of reinforcement of 9 to 1 compared to adult staff, suggesting that the density of reinforcement from peers can be so high that it seriously undermines adult guidance.

The humanistic theory, on the other hand, focuses on the student becoming a responsible, caring, feeling person. The teacher sets the example by emphasizing values, such as consideration, cooperation, respect, individuality, and honesty (Johnson, 1999). Consequently, personal needs, interests, and preferences are integral to instruction.

We found that Edward's keen interest in drawing could readily be incorporated into many tasks. Moreover, choices in lesson activities permitted greater freedom in decision making in the teaching/learning process. High-interest lessons hold the potential for maximizing on-task behavior and minimizing the impact of classroom distractions. These ideas must be tempered, nevertheless, by the practical reality that such modifications may be inconsistent with the teacher's values and preferences or may be arduous to implement with particular classroom structures (Kern, 2001; see Figure 1).

The cognitive theory builds on the foundation that knowledge is learned and that changes in knowledge make changes in behavior possible. Cognitive

strategies emphasize rational thinking, self-talk, self-instruction, problem-solving, self-management, and social skills training. For the latter, social skills training might comprise mutually developed classroom rules, stress management techniques, cooperative learning strategies, and conflict resolution approaches. Awareness of newfound social skills has caused students to gain self-worth, increasing overall self-esteem (Shapiro, 1993).

Edward's cognitive level of development warranted consideration of strategies that tap rational thinking. The student's impulsive tendencies might be tempered by a problem-solving technique, in particular, that encourages him to reflect on the problem, generate solutions to the problem, prioritize potential solutions, and implement his plan. Deep breathing and other stress-management strategies could be coupled with this training to enhance effectiveness.

Another group of treatment options emanates from the behavioral theory family. The behavioral approach posits that new behaviors are learned by reinforcement that increases the likelihood

Figure 1. A student's keen interest in drawing could readily be incorporated into many tasks.



of a response. Personalized rewards are essential for success.

Through interview and observation, it was ascertained that Edward's desired behavior might be increased by rewards that include drawing time, computer time, classroom jobs, or socialization time. Further, at Edward's chronological age, self-management systems that foster self-regulation of behavior would be appropriate. Close, ongoing monitoring of any technique was key to the outcome of the interventions.

Drawing interventions from the four theory families strengthened the power of the treatment as a package of several

The humanistic theory focuses on the student becoming a responsible, caring, feeling person.

interventions. We conducted focused interviews and made more observations to help us individualize aspects of our interventions.

Step 3: Taking Action

Next, we chose specific interventions that reflected distinct theoretical bases and the following elements.

Social Learning Theory. We targeted observational learning and vicarious reinforcement as intervention strategies. Peer models demonstrated the desired behaviors of on-task performance and self-control. Clear expectations also promoted the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate outlets of frustration. In addition, we highlighted literary connections that illustrated regulated reactions to frustration.

Humanistic Learning Theory. Systematic observation revealed the activities that were associated with problematic behaviors, as well as the preferences and interests of the student. We then modified assignments so that we could maintain instructional objectives, yet still incorporate an area of individual interest (Kern, 2001). We readily found ways to encourage Edward to draw pictures as a part of his lessons. Creative

writing also maintained Edward's attention, and, consequently, received more consideration in lesson planning.

Cognitive Learning Theory. Problem-solving and social skills training constituted new units of instruction for the class as a whole. Social-learning stories and literature provided the context for practicing a 5-step problem-solving strategy. The generic components of problem-solving included

- Recognition of the problem.
- Definition of the problem.
- Generation of possible solutions.
- Evaluation of each solution.
- Design of the plan of action.

In addition, the class revisited and refined classroom rules in a mutual effort to engender a stronger sense of community. We also taught stress-management techniques involving deep breathing and self-talk, to reduce tension.

Behavioral Learning Theory. We devised a behaviorally oriented form of self-management checklists, coupled with positive reinforcement; and we tailored it to fit Edward's acting-out and off-task behavior. A recording system directed Edward's attention to four prompt questions: Did I yell out? Did I stay on-task? Did I act respectfully to the other students and teachers? Did I use proper outlets to calm down? Edward used a check plus, check, and check

minus to self-evaluate these areas. Five, two, and zero points corresponded to these checks, respectively.

We implemented the system during reading, math, and transition periods and determined the integrity of his self-assessment through intermittent observations.

Step 4: Reflecting on the Action

The management of behavior is a complex endeavor that requires clarity, individualization, reflection, and consequences. The eclectic use of strategies from multiple theory families can maximize effectiveness in the classroom. In this study, interventions were deliberately combined from the social learning, humanistic, cognitive, and behavioral theories to integrate approaches and diminish acting-out and off-task behavior (see Figure 2).

A primary consideration in the formation of any behavior management plan is clarity of expectations. Expectations may be explicit, in the form of stated rules, or as implicit, in the form of peer modeling. Beyond this, behavior management programs demand individualization of design. You may incorporate student interests and preferences into lessons to motivate student learning without compromising instructional goals. In addition, teaching students to become reflective holds

Figure 2. A Student Checks His Self-Management Record Form



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great potential for cultivating problem-solving and social skills. Through thoughtful analysis, students may develop abilities in

- Identifying problem dimensions.
- Taking multiple perspectives.
- Brainstorming solution options.
- Evaluating personal changes.
- Implementing stress reduction strategies.

Finally, consequences strengthen desired responses. With an orientation toward a positive, nurturing environment, you can reward students for systematic progress toward behavior goals.

Figure 3 illustrates the effect of such an approach, in the form of an intervention package, on Edward's behavior. Within a relatively short period of time,

Edward's mean baseline level of 17.5 minutes of off-task behavior decreased to a mean intervention level of 5 minutes across a 15-day time span. It is not unusual for behaviors to temporarily rebound during intervention. Unusual events or behavior bursts may occur during the process of changing behavior. Nevertheless, in this case, improvement was effective. Gains were substantiated by interrater agreements of 86% and 87% during baseline and intervention phases.

Final Thoughts

In progressive classrooms, pedagogical practices change to accommodate the learners. Teachers who have an inclination toward reflection and refinement will naturally be drawn into the teacher/researcher mode when confronted with a challenging behavior management issue. Such educators will enter the cyclical process of framing critical questions, collecting relevant data, taking well-researched actions, and reflecting on the effect of their actions. With a dedication to a child's learning environment, teachers engaging in action research increase the likelihood of success for students like Edward and his classmates.

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Sharon Faith Schoen (CEC #388), Associate Professor, La Salle University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. **Jen Nolen**, Teacher, Council Rock School District, Holland, Pennsylvania.

Address correspondence to Sharon Faith Schoen, Associate Professor, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA 19141 (e-mail: schoen@lasalle.edu).

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Figure 3. Total Minutes Off-Task Due to Acting-Out Behavior

