

Effects of Teacher Greetings on Student On-task Behavior

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Abstract

A multiple baseline design across participants was used to determine how teacher greetings affected on-task behavior of 3 middle school students with problem behaviors. Momentary time sampling was used to measure on-task behavior during the first 10 min of class. Teacher greetings produced increases in students' on-task behavior from a mean of 45% in baseline to a mean of 72% during the intervention phase. Teacher greetings represent an antecedent manipulation that can easily be implemented in classrooms to improve students' on-task behavior.

Keywords: antecedent, on-task behavior, middle school students, teaching, teacher attention

In secondary education classrooms, the first several minutes of a class period are crucial for completing a variety of administrative tasks such as taking attendance, collecting assignments, and making announcements. To facilitate completion of these tasks, [Emmer, Evertson, and Worsham \(2006\)](#) suggested that teachers assign an activity for students to perform independently during the first 10 min of class. However, it can be challenging for teachers to achieve and maintain student on-task behavior while simultaneously completing administrative tasks. Given these competing demands, teachers may be likely to inadvertently reinforce students' off-task behavior by attending to students only when they are off task. When this occurs, classroom contingencies are likely to promote off-task rather than on-task behavior.

A growing body of research identifies the benefits of manipulating antecedent variables to reduce problem behavior and increase appropriate behavior (see [Kern, Choutka, & Sokol, 2002](#), for a review). For example, [McComas, Thompson, and Johnson \(2003\)](#) decreased attention-maintained problem behavior displayed by elementary students by delivering attention as an antecedent. Relative to some consequence-based interventions (e.g., extinction) antecedent interventions can be more easily integrated into a classroom teacher's pedagogy. Thus, additional studies that evaluate classroom-based antecedent interventions are warranted. The intervention implemented in the present study involved an easy-to-use antecedent manipulation designed to increase on-task behavior during the first 10 min of class; teachers were asked to greet target students as they entered the classroom.

Participants

Participants were 3 students enrolled in separate middle schools in an urban area in South Carolina. These students were nominated by their teachers based on a pattern of consistent difficulty remaining on task during the first 10 min of class. None of the participants received special education services.

Tim was an eighth-grade boy of Hispanic-American descent who reportedly displayed frequent off-task (e.g., failing to complete class work, sleeping, not being prepared) and disruptive (e.g., talking out, annoying other students) behavior. Observations occurred from 8:27 a.m. to 8:37 a.m. during first-period science class. Kay was a Caucasian seventh-grade girl who was described as easily distracted (e.g., looking out the window, not paying attention). She was observed during second-period science class from 9:36 a.m. to 9:46 a.m. Jon was an African-American sixth-grade boy who engaged in disruptive (e.g., talking inappropriately, leaving his seat) and off-task (sleeping, not following directions) behavior. Jon was observed during second-period reading class from 10:10 a.m. to 10:20 a.m.

Data Collection and Interobserver Agreement

The occurrence or nonoccurrence of on-task behavior was recorded using momentary time sampling, with 15-s intervals. A student was considered on task when he or she was (a) actively listening to teacher instructions, defined as being oriented toward the teacher or task and responding verbally (e.g., asking questions about the instructions) or nonverbally (e.g., nodding); (b) following the teacher's instructions; (c) orienting appropriately toward the teacher or task; or (d) seeking help in the proper manner (e.g., raising hand). When determining percentages of on-task behavior, data were summarized by tallying intervals coded as on task and dividing by the total number of intervals. Interobserver agreement was assessed during 20% of sessions. Interobserver agreement was determined by comparing the number of intervals with on-task behavior recorded by each observer; the lower number of intervals was divided by the higher number of intervals and multiplied by 100%. Mean agreement for on-task behavior was 77% (range, 73% to 81%) for Tim, 96% (range, 92% to 100%) for Kay, and 84% (range, 80% to 87%) for Jon.

Procedure

A multiple baseline across participants design was used to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher greetings on on-task behavior. Data were recorded in each student's classroom during the first 10 min of the class period as students participated in the normal class routine. Students were unaware that they were being observed or were participating in a research study. Observers arrived in the classroom during the change of classes and were seated in an inconspicuous location within the classroom prior to the beginning of class. Participants were observed 2 days per week (unless absent), for a total of 6 weeks.

Baseline

During baseline, teachers were asked to maintain their typical daily routine, which did not include greeting students at the door. Teachers were not informed of the planned intervention technique (i.e., the teacher greeting).

Teacher Greetings

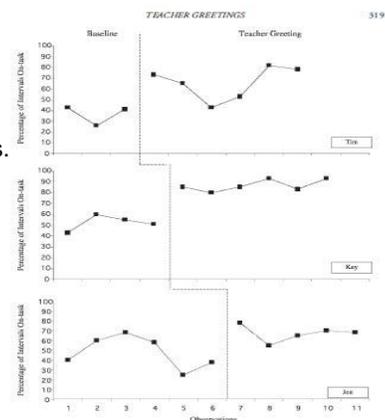
Teachers were instructed to greet the target student at the door by using the student's name along with a positive statement (e.g., “I like your new shoes,” “I am glad you are here today”). No specific scripts were given because of the need for this interaction to be perceived by students as sincere and consistent with the setting. Following the doorway greeting, teachers were instructed to continue their normal routine.

Results and Discussion

The percentage of intervals with on-task behavior for each participant is illustrated in [Figure 1](#). Teacher greetings were associated with an increase in on-task behavior for all participants. Tim was on task during a mean of 37% (range, 26% to 43%) of baseline observations and a mean of 66% (range, 43% to 82%) of observations during the teacher greeting phase. Kay's on-task behavior increased from 52% (range, 43% to 60%) during baseline to 87% (range, 80% to 93%) when she was greeted upon entering the classroom. Jon was on task during a mean of 48% (range, 25% to 68%) of intervals during baseline and 67% (range, 55% to 78%) of intervals during the teacher greeting phase. The effects of the intervention are less clear with Jon because three points from baseline (during which a movie was shown) overlap with results obtained in the intervention condition.

Figure 1

Percentage of intervals with on-task behaviors across participants and phases.



There are several plausible interpretations of these results. First, it is possible that antecedent attention provided during the greeting reduced or eliminated the establishing operation for attention-maintained off-task behavior, thereby increasing on-task behavior during the initial portion of class (e.g., [Laraway, Snyckerski, Michael, & Poling, 2003](#)). However, in the absence of a functional analysis of off-task behavior, this account remains speculative. Second, teacher greetings may have functioned as a discriminative stimulus indicating the availability of attention as reinforcement for appropriate behavior. Third, increases in student on-task behavior may have been a result of unprogrammed changes in the reinforcement schedule for appropriate behavior. Data on teacher implementation of the programmed intervention, as well as other potentially influential interactions with students (e.g., consequences for appropriate behavior, number and type of instructions), are necessary to draw conclusions regarding the relation between teacher greetings and on-task behavior.

Teachers often report being overwhelmed by the many noninstructional responsibilities of their profession. Furthermore, they frequently balk at implementing complicated and intrusive interventions for individual students. Sprague and Walker (2000) stressed the importance of intervention research being practical for implementation in the schools. The current research suggests one quick, simple antecedent intervention that can increase student on-task behavior during the first 10 min of class. Merely greeting a student at the door with his or her name and a brief, genuine pleasantry increased student on-task behavior. Future research should evaluate the effects of this and other easy-to-implement antecedent interventions on a wider variety of student performances (e.g., attendance, academic progress) during more extended observation periods. In addition, it would be valuable to identify the conditions necessary for long-term maintenance of these effects. For example, it is possible that high levels of on-task behavior would be maintained with intermittent teacher greetings.

References

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