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**THE EFFECT OF CHOICE ON THE BEHAVIOR OF OFF TASK HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING**

by

**Laura M. Campbell**

**A Thesis submitted to the**

**Department of Special Education Services and Instruction**

**College of Education**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of**

**Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities**

at

**Rowan University**

**August 4, 2011**

**Thesis Chair: S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.**

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## **Abstract**

The Effect of Choice on the Behavior of Off Task High School Students  
in an Alternative School Setting

August 4, 2011

Laura M. Campbell

Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

This study was done to examine the effect of choice on off task behaviors in high school students attending an alternative school. The participants were from various backgrounds, ability levels, and presence of disabilities. The students were observed performing three target behaviors; specifically talking off topic, being out of a seat needlessly, and being out of the classroom. This was initiated during a baseline observation period, and again over a five day period after being introduced to the choice process. The alternative activities from which they chose were lesson extensions, educational puzzles or reading material, or classroom jobs. This was done to hypothetically redirect misbehaviors into more productive activities. Thirteen of the sixteen student participants decreased their off task behaviors when using choice plan. They substituted educational activities that kept them on task. Overall, the choice plan reduced off task behaviors in students surveyed. Specifically, talking off topic and being out of the room were reduced while being out of a seat increased slightly.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Many teachers struggle to keep students occupied while other students are finishing their class work. Some of the problems that can result include boredom, off task students, arguments, students out of seats, and out of the room for various reasons. Any of these can lead to more serious behavior issues both inside the classroom and in hallways or other classrooms. All of these cause disruption to education that should go on in a school. If strategies are put into place to keep students occupied, many of these problems can be avoided.

The detrimental behaviors resulting from students being off task can occur in any school, however they have been directly observed in an alternative program for at risk students in grades nine through twelve. The school population includes students in regular education as well as for students with individual education plans and Section 504 plans. Other students may have behavior issues or misdiagnosed special educational needs. Still others are repeating a class they previously failed, often due to attendance issues. The wide range of academic achievement, behaviors, and chronological age makes differentiated instruction necessary. Even with this intervention, however, students may finish their work before the rest of the class and cannot handle the “down time.” Puzzle books and reading materials are available at all times, however, a student who struggles to finish his assigned work will view puzzles and books as more work. The aim of this research will be to measure the effectiveness of an intervention that allows off task students to choose one of several appropriate activities to help them

manage their behavior during classroom transition times. When given a choice of activities, students should be more occupied than without the choices. They should better control their own behavior and make more productive use of their time. Ultimately, I predict that the students will stay on task more and be more aware of the choices they make so that they behave more appropriately in school during transition or down times.

My interest in this study begins with my own classroom but extends beyond. For example, the insights gained from my students will be reflective of some other populations of students. The ultimate goal of our educational system is to release well-informed students into a society in which they can be contributing members. A higher success rate for my students translates into a better community. Coping skills are learned in addition to math, science, and language arts. These skills may become more valuable than the book knowledge acquired at school. This is the situation in all of our schools in America, not just mine. This research will affect teachers by providing insight into their students and ideas for classroom management. It will affect students by increasing their productivity and educational success. Parents and the community will also benefit by having more qualified citizens in their towns, which could lead to more peace and less spending.

Another group that will benefit from this research is the school system itself. Methods for improving student behavior can be implemented in regular education classrooms, as well as behavioral and special needs rooms. Parents can use the strategy at home to reinforce the learning that occurs at school and increase their repertoire of child-rearing skills. Using the strategy in many classrooms of all types and levels increases the possibility that some of the students will develop coping skills before they

become behavior problems. There would eventually be a reduced need or a specifically targeted one for alternative programs. This would save taxpayers money, and keep more children in the same educational setting rather than a separate learning environment.

The choice strategy can be used as a supplement to regular coursework for students who have finished their assignments. Ideally, it will not penalize or increase the workload, but will keep students engaged in learning. There will be many reasons for students finishing class work early and then having “nothing to do.” Some of these reasons will be boredom, prior knowledge of material, lack of motivation within themselves, lack of support at home, embarrassment of asking for help, and many other reasons. I expect boredom and learning class material a second time to be among the top reasons that students finish class work early, and then interrupt the other students who are still trying to work. Options of activities to do after assignments and types of off task behaviors observed will be components of this research.

I anticipate much cooperation from my classes as they will have a direct benefit from this research. If the reasons for off task behaviors are close to what I have hypothesized previously, my students should become more introspective and begin to self monitor their behavior. I will have a better idea of who enjoys which types of activity. Transitions to new chapters, test days, and make up days, should all go more smoothly. Students who are still working will have the ability to focus on their work while students who are finished will be more occupied and therefore less of a distraction. Teaching is a sharing profession, so any gain in my classroom is a gain for the school. I will be able to share my success with other teachers in my building and the consistency throughout will reinforce the good things the students are doing. Overall, it is the coping skills they learn

that will change if I find what I've projected to find. How does having a choice of activities during transition times affect the behavior of off task students in ninth through twelfth grade in an alternative program? This study predicts to discover that off task behaviors will be reduced through use of the choice strategy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The effects of a self management strategy on classroom behaviors and homework completion was studied in a public middle school in Connecticut and reported by Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White (2007). This report studied six Caucasian male subjects of age 11 or 12 with ADHD. Two were on medication to help their ADHD while four were non-medicated. These students were referred by their classroom teachers. The target behaviors chosen were being on time for class, being prepared to start class, having paper and notebook, and having pen or pencil. Specific classes were determined for interventions based on where the least amount of homework was completed. Checklists were used by the teacher and students to collect data on the amount of times these behaviors occurred. The percentage of homework completed was also collected as a dependent measure. Baseline data was collected until there was three days worth of stable data. Training began when participants engaged in less than 75% of the target behaviors and completed less than 75% of their homework. Training required individual students to meet with the school psychologist for fifteen minutes for three days in a row. The child discussed his current behavior as well as the goal behaviors at these meetings and then used a written log and checklist to monitor their own behavior. In monitoring phase the student met again with the psychologist until 100% of the behaviors and homework were demonstrated at least 4 out of 5 consecutive days. In fading phase the child only met every other day with the psychologist until the 100% on 4 of 5 days criteria was met. Maintenance phase required only one meeting per week until criteria

were met. Then students had a choice whether to continue the written logs and checklists or forego them. The result of this study was that the self management strategy used increased the participants' classroom preparation and completion of homework.

(Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White, 2007)

A study of the effects of self management on middle school children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White, 2007) is of particular interest because there is minimal research on older children. The definition of self management in this study included the three aspects of self monitoring, self evaluation, and self reinforcement. Increases in positive behavior were noted, as well as increases in the focus behavior of organization as it relates to increase in classroom preparation skills and homework completion. This procedure was reportedly easy and comfortable for the teachers to use. Implementation did not use much of the teachers' time, leaving them quality instructional time in the classroom. In fact, since the process reduced disruptive behaviors, they presumably wound up with more time to teach. The process was used in a self contained classroom but due to the fact that there is little training and no technology necessary it can easily be carried over to any classroom. There were even positive results seen in the two control students in general education classrooms. A downfall to this design is that it only uses a few subjects so data cannot be extrapolated and results lose some validity. However, this article discussed a replication of an earlier study. If there are more replications under similar circumstances, these studies may contribute to the overall validity of the process.

Behavior interventions should be considered with ADHD students whether they are receiving medication for ADHD or not. School psychologists have successfully used

a combination of therapy, medications, and organizational interventions as routine treatment for ADHD symptoms for years. The skills ADHD students lack that need to be reinforced are self management, organization, and self control. Positive behavior outcomes as well as increased productivity in class and on homework assignments were the result of these needed interventions and self management was a byproduct of the choice method. (Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White, 2007)

A study was done with students with serious emotional disturbance by Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jenson (2001) with the goal of reducing disruptive behaviors in students with social and/or emotional disorders. This study reported results of using a mixture of techniques such as mystery motivators, positive reinforcement, teacher movement around the class, and posted rules to reduce disruptive behavior. These were implemented during the intervention phase of the study. The teacher chose which combination of techniques to employ in order to improve behavior. A summary of the target behaviors to be reduced included failure to respond to the teacher, talking or making inappropriate noises, being out of a seat, using non-work related objects, verbal and physical aggression, and looking at something other than the teacher or assigned work. A behavior checklist was created and used by the teacher to record data on the three African American participants. Observation data was also recorded during sessions lasting twenty minutes each. Ten second intervals were used to record the amount of behaviors in those time frames. This same procedure was used in the baseline and intervention phases. During follow up phase, all parts of the intervention were removed from the classroom, including the list of rules. Two males and one female, ages 8, 9, and 10 with some combination of serious emotional disturbance, ODD, and ADHD were the subjects

used. There were also two more ten year old African American students included as controls, one male with ODD and one female with ODD and ADHD. This study was completed in the alternative school they attend by the special education teacher and a paraprofessional. The three subjects of the study reduced their disruptive behaviors with the interventions while the two control students maintained a consistent level throughout all phases of the study. (Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jenson, 2001)

There are research reports that address choice method and preference, but they generally do not agree regarding what causes positive behavioral change and improved academic performance. Preference in this context refers to a student wanting to do one thing rather than another. A student may like reading over drawing and will therefore prefer to read an assignment over making an illustration. This student will presumably do better on a reading assignment purely by virtue of the fact that it was more interesting to them. If this same student was given a choice of the two assignments he or she would probably choose the one he or she prefers. Therefore, preference can affect choice as well as choice affects preference. Several studies used various methods to try to control for effects of the other factor. These methods included randomization, experimental analysis, yoked conditions, and preference assessments.

Morgan (2006) reported a survey of fifteen studies that showed that preference using choice making improved on task moments more than choice making by itself. Most of these studies found that preference improved behavior with or without a choice, while making a choice only produced moderate results with low preference. There were no definitive conclusions made due to the interaction of choice and preference. These studies also were done on a wide range of classroom and institutional settings whereas

this study will measure students in a district school behavioral program. The collective participants in this survey were primarily boys but there were some girls represented also. The conditions of the children include MR, ADHD, moderate to severe disabilities, severe or frequent behavior problems, and even Autism and Down's syndrome. Most of these studies measure problem versus desirable behaviors. Others include a measure of task completion, correct responses, and homework completion. Four of these studies reported by Morgan are of particular interest because of their similar topic of the effect of choice making on behaviors. (Morgan, 2006)

A study from 1995 by Cosden, Gannon, & Haring compared choice controlled by the teacher to choice controlled by the student. Three 11 to 13 year old males with severe behavior problems were given a choice of tasks as well as a choice of reinforcements. Task completion and accuracy were the behaviors targeted. Even though the teacher attempted to make choices similar to those the students would make, the student chosen tasks and reinforcements increased performance more than teacher chosen ones. The most successful situation was when the student picked both the task and reward. (Cosden, Gannon, & Haring, 1995)

A more in depth study was done on a seven year old boy with ADHD and reported in 1997. His target behaviors were noncompliance, being away from his seat, disturbing others, staring, and not doing his work. Two people observed him during language arts lessons in his classroom which averaged about 23 students daily. Training was given to the observers to assure more accurate data collection. The no choice option required the boy to complete the same work as the rest of his class while the choice option allowed him to choose one of three assignments. His choice was presented from

the curriculum and was the same length and difficulty level as his peers' work but the content varied. The amount of target behaviors decreased for this child when he was allowed to choose his assignments. This study helps support the hypothesis that choice can help children in general education classes. It showed a positive outcome and did not take time away from classroom instruction. It was limited in that only one student was studied and it did not look at the completion of work as a data point. More studies need to be done to replicate the results in order to see how well the plan would work in the general education classroom before its implementation there. (Powell & Nelson, 1997)

The effect of choice on off task behaviors was also studied in a population with severe handicaps. There were three subjects in this study, one age 5 and the others age 11. The handicaps were developmental delay with autistic features, pervasive developmental delay with autistic features, and severe mental retardation. Social skills and adaptive behaviors were lacking in these children. In choice plan the subjects were given three to four educational tasks and three to five rewards from which to choose. Subjects either pointed or named their choices, depending on their ability level. No choice plan used the teacher's choice of task, reward, and schedule. Sessions only lasted a maximum of twenty minutes, four times per day, and five days were left between sessions. Target behaviors were specific to each child but included aggression, object misuse, tantrums, moving away from the table, and self-injury. The rate of completion of each task was calculated by recording the number of correct responses. Results of this study were that choice reduced the number of target behaviors, serious aggressions were reduced with choice, and correct responses were not affected by having a choice. Continuing to allow choice over an extended period of time was also more effective and

efficient than reported in studies reviewed by the researchers. Overall this system was easy to use and in this case helped those with even severe handicaps. (Dyer, Dunlap, & Winterling, 1990).

Another study was done in 2002 comparing the effect of choice on children with problem behaviors maintained by attention to those with problem behaviors maintained by escape. Seven children with various learning and physical disabilities were observed for this study. Problem behaviors were different for each student but included hitting, out of seat, off task, inappropriate gestures or noises, and throwing, among others. Data was collected on six of the subjects by percentage of time while the seventh was collected by frequency since his behaviors were short in duration but happened often. First, a functional analysis was performed to determine the motivator of problem behaviors. Observations were done for five minutes, three or four sessions at a time; two to three days per week. For children who use escape a ten second break was given from the task at hand. For those who use attention a five second reprimand was given. Once the reinforcement was determined for each child the choice plan was observed. In no choice the student was given a task to complete chosen by the teacher. When there was a choice the student chose which teacher selected task to do. Subjects could also change to a different task during the choice scenario. Three of the children maintain problem behaviors with escape. These three reduced the amount of misbehaviors during choice. One student maintained misbehavior with both escape and attention. She also reduced the amount of problem behaviors when she had a choice. The three students who maintain problem behaviors with attention showed no change with or without choices. This study concluded that children with escape as a motivator for misbehavior could

benefit more from choice than those motivated by attention. Another conclusion made was that behavior interventions should match the reason for the problem behaviors in order to work more effectively. This study is important because it addresses the cause of the problem behaviors. Knowing the cause of each child's misbehavior can help make a more targeted and successful rehabilitation plan. (Romaniuk, Miltenberger, Conyers, Jenner, Jurgens, & Ringenber, 2002)

Another study of choice of task sequence used five students in a residential facility with emotional or behavioral disorders. Subjects ranged in age from 13 to 16 in grades 7 to 9. There were three females and two males of which two were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was Latin American. All were on at least two medications each. The special education teacher plus one or two behavior specialists were present at all times during the study. A comparison of choice to no choice was made with these students. In the no choice model teachers told students they would have two assignments to complete, told the students which to complete first, and then asked if there were any questions and answered them. In choice model, however, the teachers told students they would have two assignments to complete, explained the assignments, asked and answered any questions, asked which one they would like to do first, and wrote a number one on the paper they chose to do first. Data was collected on time on task, completion of the tasks, and accuracy. Increases in all three of the target behaviors indicate a positive result. This study was important because it examined adolescents. As noted previously, most research has been done on younger children so the high school and middle school subjects can shed light on how well choice works for them. (Ramsey, Jolivet, Patterson, & Kennedy, 2010)

This study will examine high school students in an alternative school setting with behavioral and emotional difficulties. These similarities to previous research provide a framework for present data collection. This study will focus on reduction of the target behaviors of being off task, out of a seat, and out of the room. Task completion and correct answers are understood to be increased by improvement in behavior since the child will be more attentive in class and therefore complete more work and learn more. These data and results will be noted and analyzed. The factors that may contribute to these behaviors such as ADHD and emotional or behavioral disabilities will be taken into account but not used to focus on any individuals. A pre- post group design will be used. The positive results seen in most of the prior research provides support for the hypothesis that choice will increase on task behavior and reduce behavior problems in the classroom. A combination of these reports will be used to make the present study accurate and useful to the educational community but especially to the children who stand to gain from it.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### Subjects and Setting

The subjects of this study were all enrolled in an alternative high school behavioral program for at risk students. The behavioral part of the program was for students who have been disciplined for fighting, weapons, lateness, attendance, consistent behavior problems, and other reasons that do not allow them to fit in well to the regular high school setting. The credit completion part of the program was for students who have failed previous years of school and now would like to make up the credits in order to graduate on time with their class. The combination of two very different goals for different students has made discipline and classroom management very random.

The students came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds (poor to rich), parental living situations (parents in jail, two and one parent homes, guardians or siblings in charge), and all settings from rural to urban. They lived in a city with the largest area in square footage in South Jersey which created a very diverse group of people. This diversity was seen even in the microcosm of the program as there is not one majority race, creed, or color.

Sixteen students were chosen from among the fifty total students in the science classes. These 16 students were identified through baseline data on off task behavior. These subjects were then given a number for reporting purposes rather than using names or initials. This was done in order to protect their privacy and identity.

Student participants were between the ages of 15 and 19. Four were females and 12 were males. There were five African American, ten Hispanic, and one Caucasian student in the study. Participants were enrolled in Earth Science, Biology, or both of these classes this school year. Some were taking the classes for the first time and others were repeating them because they have failed previously. The classes were college level although the students were of varying academic abilities. Of the sixteen students that were part of the choice plan implementation, one was classified and one had a 504 plan. The rest were regular education students with no accommodations or behavioral plans other than being in the alternative high school setting.

#### Procedure

All science classes were observed for five days each to obtain baseline behavioral data on the number of times students were off task during class time using three criteria. Off task behavior was defined as talking off topic, being out of their seat needlessly, or obtaining a pass to go out of the room. One student during collection of both baseline and after implementation data cut class. This was counted as obtaining a pass out of the room because he took a pass in the beginning of the period and never returned to class.

During the implementation phase of this study those students exhibiting the target behaviors were given a choice of specific activities to do in lieu of the misbehavior or free time when finished class work. All students were instructed about the components of the program and given the chance to participate. However, data was only collected on

the 16 subjects of the study. This was done to ensure that no one was singled out and to have some sort of control over the variable factors of the study.

When a student was observed doing one of the target behaviors that student was given a choice of three alternate activities. The specific activities varied somewhat depending on the lessons and the classroom agenda. The first choice was to complete extension activities that were related to the current lesson. These included reinforcement activities from the text book series, creating something like a collage of the new material, or writing notes or an outline for absent or suspended students. A second choice was to complete an educational activity that was unrelated to the current classroom topic. There was a collection of novels, word puzzles, crosswords, Sudoku puzzles, and other assorted logic or thinking activities to select from and do. The third choice was to help with a classroom job. Filing papers, grading tests, and running errands to the main and guidance offices were among the jobs available to the students. Students were observed to see if they used their time more wisely and therefore reduced the amount of off task behaviors and increased productivity.

All students were made aware of the new choice options and routine over a one week period. They were given this time to adjust to the new classroom behavior process. Any student who was out of their seat, out of the room, or talking off topic was given a choice of a lesson extension, educational activity, or classroom job. Several types of lesson extensions and educational puzzles were made available on a shelf in the classroom where they were easily accessible to the students. They could help themselves without causing distraction to their classmates. The classroom jobs were given out by the teacher after making a list of what jobs needed to be done. The teacher decided what jobs

might be appropriate for the particular student and offered at least two options to them. For example, the student who wants to be out of the room a lot was offered errand tasks to the offices, and more organized students who need to keep their hands busy were given filing or note taking jobs. Although the jobs were selected based on the individual student's abilities and tendencies, they were still given the choice of at least two tasks so it was ultimately their decision. The other activities were offered in various academic levels and were numerous enough to allow for independent selection of them.

After the week of introduction the students were again observed for five days. Problem behaviors were noted as in the baseline phase of the study. Data was collected as to the number of incidents of the three target misbehaviors. Tables and charts were created to show whether each student increased or decreased the amount of target behaviors as well as whether the behaviors as a whole increased or decreased. The goal of implementing choice was to see the effect on behavior. Problem behaviors were to be reduced, time on task and productivity were to be increased, and ultimately students should move toward self management of their behavior. The choice plan was continued in all classes and with all students after the study was completed. A general observation of classroom behavior as a whole continued to be made during this time to see if the plan was still reducing off task behaviors. However, data collection was not continued with individual participants after official completion of the study.

## **Chapter 4**

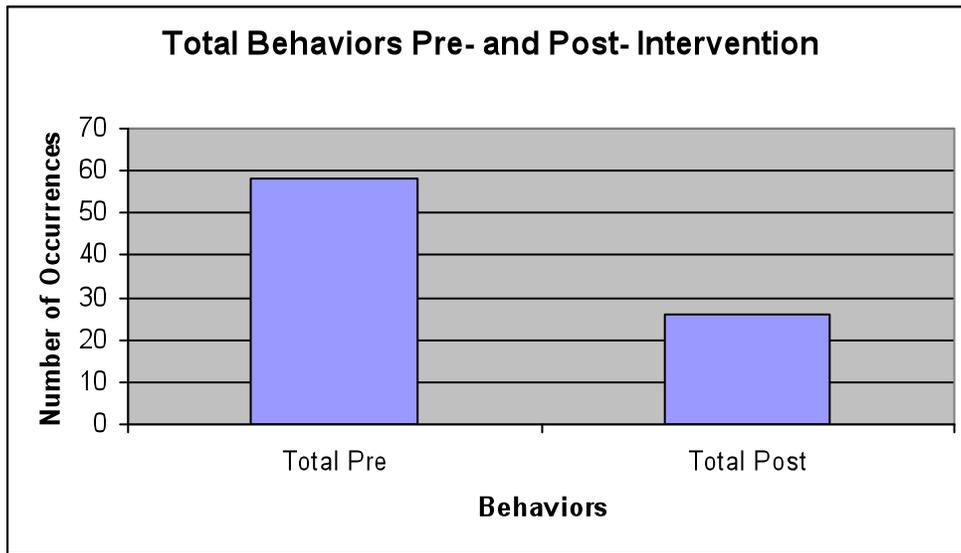
### **Results**

Sixteen high school students were observed performing three specific target behaviors during a baseline observation period and over a five day period after being introduced to a choice plan. The target behaviors were talking off topic, being out of a seat needlessly, and being out of the classroom. The choices of activities as alternatives to misbehavior and during transition times were lesson extensions, educational puzzles or reading material, or classroom jobs. The focus of this pre- post group design study was to determine if having a choice of activities during transition time would affect the behavior of off task students in ninth through twelfth grade in an alternative school setting.

The results indicate that most students reduced the number of incidents of off task behaviors when using choice and that the occurrences of two of the three target behaviors were reduced in classes as a whole.

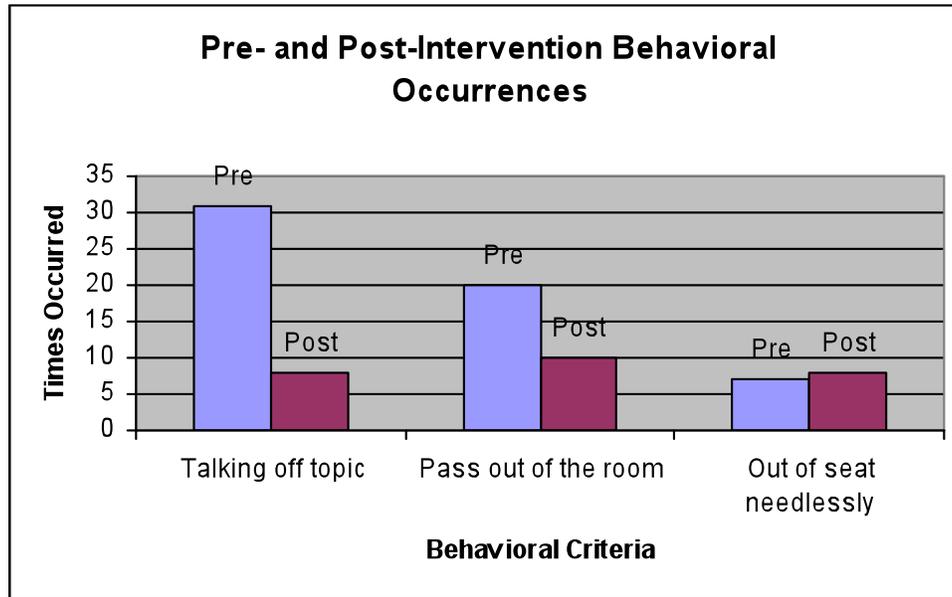
The incidence of each of the three target behaviors were tallied both before and after implementation of the choice plan for the sixteen students collectively as a group as well as individually. Total occurrences of all three misbehaviors were reduced from 58 to 26. Talking off topic was the most prevalent misbehavior before intervention, followed by being out of the room and then being out of a seat needlessly. After intervention, the most prevalent misbehavior was being out of the room, while talking off topic and being out of a seat were tied for second most numerous.

Figure 4.1: Total Behaviors Pre- and Post- Intervention



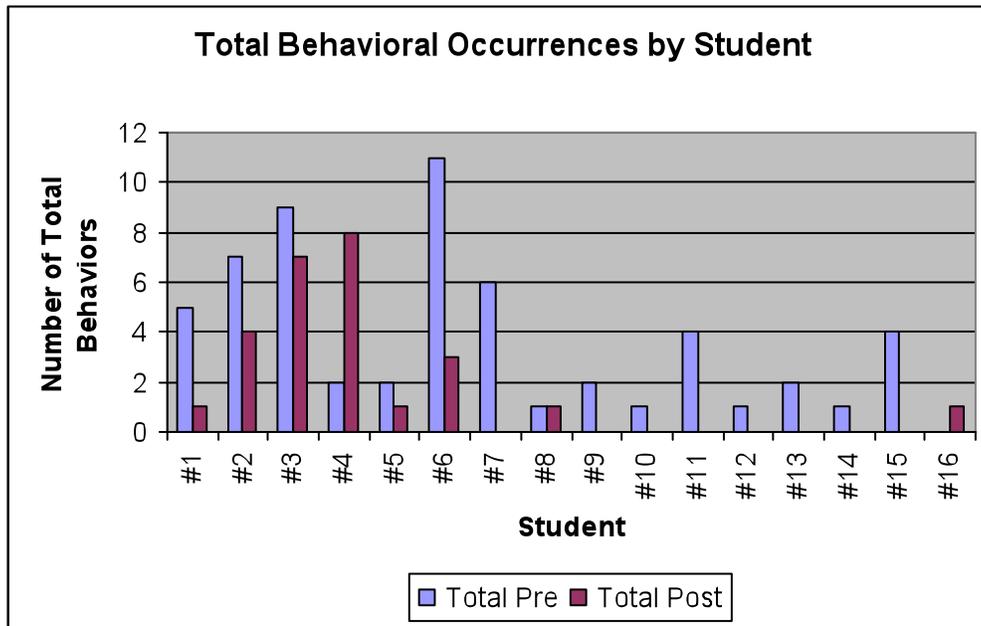
There was some variation in the results for each of the three target behaviors. Talking off topic and being out of the room occurred less frequently after the choice plan was implemented, however, being out of a seat needlessly happened more frequently with the choice plan in action. Talking off topic decreased sharply from 31 times before to 8 times after implementation. Incidents of being out of the room were cut in half from 20 to 10 after implementation. Being out of a seat needlessly was recorded 7 times before the choice plan and increased very slightly up to 8 times after the choice plan.

Figure 4.2: Pre- and Post- Intervention Behavioral Occurrences



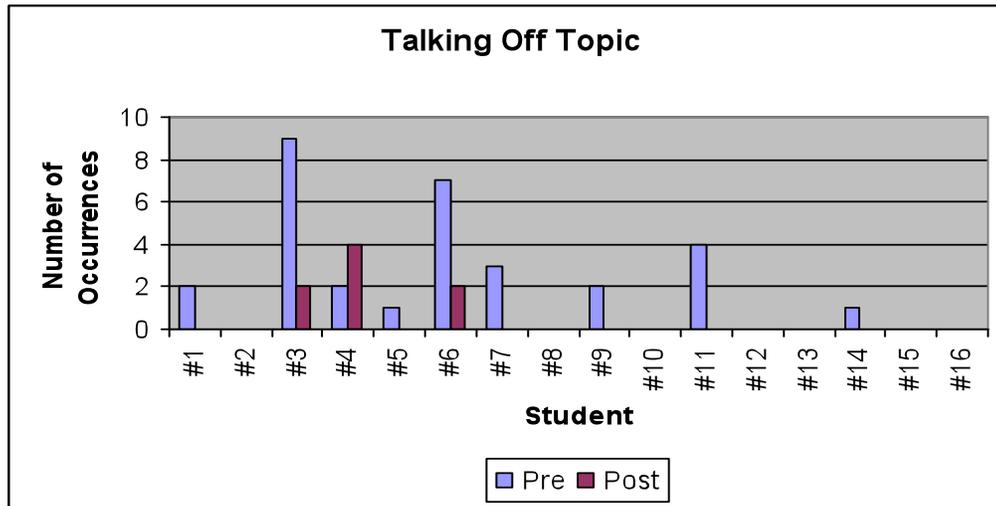
When looking at individual responses to the intervention of choice plan, most students decreased the amount of misbehaviors. Overall, thirteen students decreased the number of target behaviors, two increased the number of target behaviors, and one remained at the same number of target behaviors.

Figure 4.3: Total Behavioral Occurrences by Student



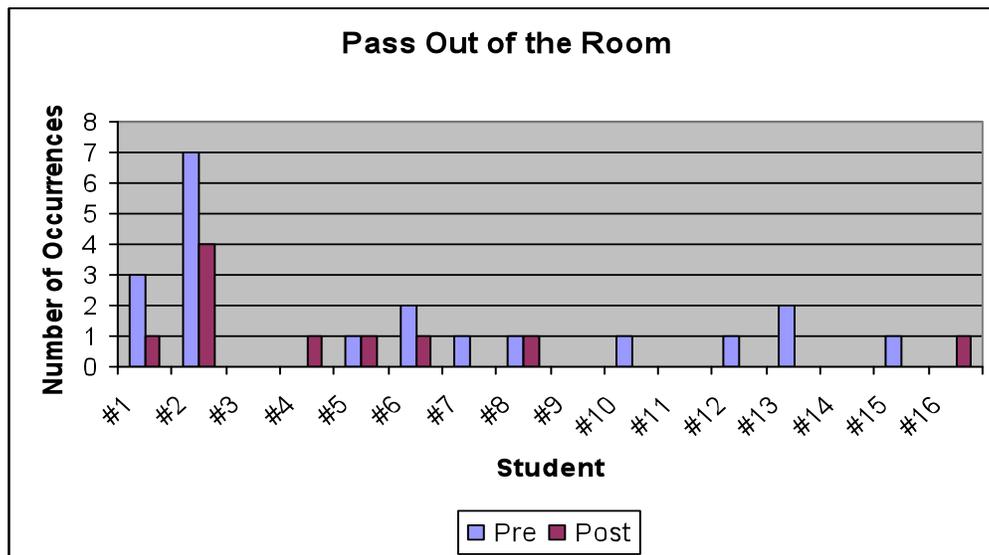
Talking off topic decreased overall from 31 incidents to 8 after choice plan implementation. Of the sixteen individual subjects, half of them decreased their talking off topic. One student increased while the remaining seven stayed at the same amount of incidents before and after using the plan.

Figure 4.4: Talking Off Topic



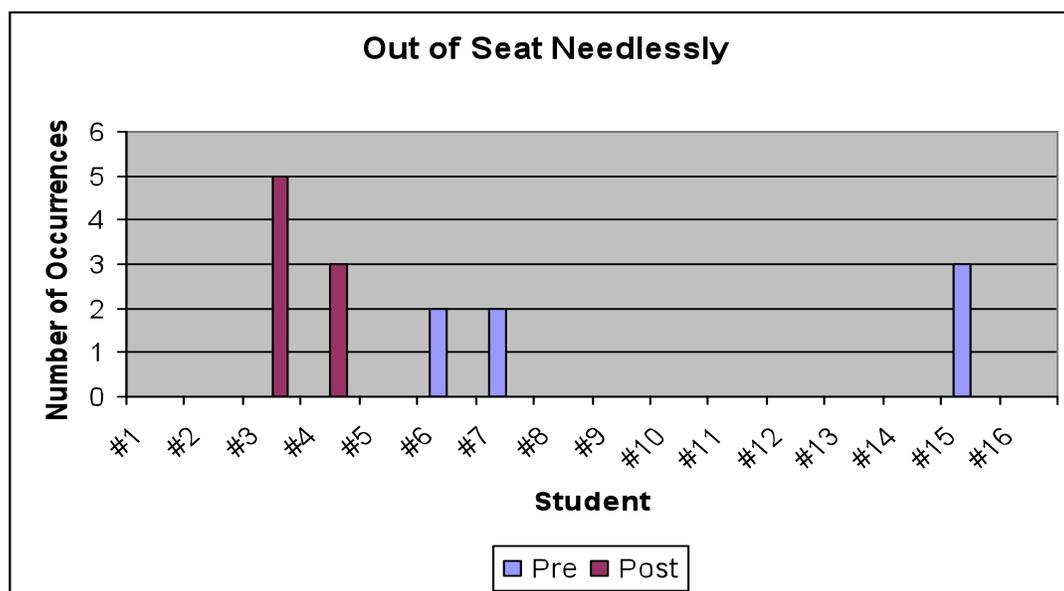
Passes out of the room were reduced from 20 to 10 using choice plan. Half of the sixteen students reduced their personal incidents of obtaining a pass while two increased the amount of passes they obtained. The other six subjects remained at the same amount of passes out of the classroom before and after implementation of choice.

Figure 4.5: Pass Out of the Room



The number of students out of their seat needlessly increased with choice plan in place. There were seven occurrences before the plan and eight after the plan. Most student subjects, eleven of them, were recorded being out of their seat needlessly the same amount of times before and after implementation of choice plan. Two students increased their time out of a seat while three others decreased their time out of a seat.

Figure 4.6: Out of Seat Needlessly



Sixteen student subjects from an alternative high school were observed, and the amount of times they were talking off topic, out of their seat needlessly, and out of the classroom were recorded. This was done both before and after implementing a choice plan which allowed students to choose from lesson extensions, educational materials, and classroom jobs during transition times.

This study was done to determine what effect having a choice of these activities would have on the amount of student misbehaviors. The overall amount of target behaviors was reduced. Specifically, talking off topic and being out of the room reduced in number while being out of a seat needlessly increased in number. Half of the sixteen subjects decreased their occurrences of talking off topic and being out of the room. Most individuals that were out of their seat recorded the same amount of times doing so both before and after implementation of the plan. Overall the amount of target behaviors was reduced after implementation of a choice for the students.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study was done to examine the effect of choice on off task behaviors in high school alternative school students. The participants were from varying backgrounds, ability levels, and had various disabilities or none. The students were observed performing three specific target behaviors (talking off topic, being out of a seat needlessly, and being out of the classroom) during a baseline observation period and again over a five day period after being introduced to a choice plan. The alternative activities from which they chose were lesson extensions, educational puzzles or reading material, or classroom jobs. This was done to hypothetically redirect misbehaviors into more productive activities. Thirteen of the sixteen student participants decreased their off task behaviors when using the choice plan. They substituted educational activities that kept them on task. Overall, the choice plan did reduce off task behaviors in students surveyed. Specifically, talking off topic and being out of the room were reduced while being out of a seat increased slightly.

#### Relation to Research

This study was not a replication of another but combined several elements of previous studies. There was not a lot of information from previous research addressing adolescents in regard to choice plans. This study used high school students as its subjects to increase the amount of research for this demographic. It also included sixteen participants while many other studies include from one to six subjects. Having more

students gives a bigger cross section of a realistic classroom. Along this vein, the study also used a mixed population of gender, ability level, disability, and age.

There have been studies on the effect of choice on students with ADHD such as those conducted by Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White (2007), and Powell & Nelson (1997). Those studies found that these students responded well to choice in reducing their misbehavior and increasing the amount of work completed. Students with severe emotional and behavioral problems were given choice in studies done by Cosden, Gannon, & Haring (1995), and Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jenson (2001). Even in these cases of children with severe behavioral problems, the students responded positively to choice by being less aggressive and completing more work. These studies, while useful, only target one population of student at a time. The present study encompassed children from varying backgrounds, ability levels, and behavioral and emotional statuses. This better represents the realistic general education classroom of today, especially with such emphasis on inclusion. Children with ADHD, behavioral problems, and emotional problems were part of this study although not identified. These children of differing diagnoses all responded positively by reducing misbehaviors as did the students in previous studies.

Many studies focused on the effect of preference on choice or the self management skills that result from choice. This study focused on choice itself and its application, rather than what may affect how it works. It also did not use reward as part of the protocol. Some studies gave choice of both activity and reward, like Cosden, Gannon, & Haring (1995). They were examining how student choice of activity and reward compares to teacher choice of activity and reward. In this study it was

hypothesized that the reward would be more efficient teaching time, more student work completed, and a calmer classroom with less distraction. With choice, this did occur for the participants of this study. The teacher as facilitator of the classroom made the selections that became the choices. In a long-running study or a classroom that uses this plan on a regular basis, it could become more student-directed over time. In this case, the teacher would still have to retain some control due to state curriculum and testing mandates. For the purposes of this study, and in the interest of time, the teacher retained control of the decisions here. Even without a tangible reward, the participants behaved better when they had a choice.

Ramsey, Jolivette, Patterson, & Kennedy (2010) measured completion and accuracy of tasks as well as observed behaviors. This study took a decrease in misbehavior to mean an inherent increase in work completed. This should be the case due to lack of distraction and more time spent on topic since the teacher no longer has to redirect as much off task behavior. This was also the result of the current study.

### Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. It was only done in one school and in one teacher's classroom. There were only 16 students which is a relatively small sample size. The children involved represented the demographic make up of the community but not of the United States. Data was collected in a short time period rather than in a longitudinal study. Students were absent on several occasions during baseline data collection, but those taking part in the intervention were all in attendance during post intervention data collection. There was not a true control group because all children were

taught how to use the choice method. Also, data was collected on students exhibiting negative target behaviors rather than whole classes. Because of the aforementioned reasons, the results cannot be extended to predict what would happen in other schools. They do, however, show that choice plan worked with this group of students. This suggests that the plan is worth trying as a remediation intervention with this particular school as well as with similar groups of subjects elsewhere.

### Practical Implications

The results of this study can be used practically by many people. The primary beneficiaries of this information are, of course, the children. Having a way to reduce off task behavior actually increases on task behavior by default. This makes students more productive and keeps referrals for misbehavior at a minimum. This in turn makes the lives of teachers, parents, and classmates easier and calmer. Allowing children to make decisions helps them in the future. They will be better able to make choices and be independent later in life when they have the opportunity to practice those choices when they are young. In a school setting, as well as at home, they should have a safe environment in which to try this method and make it work for them. This is also a positive technique rather than one that penalizes children. Generally, children respond better to positive reinforcements than negative attention.

Teachers and classmates could benefit from the added classroom control choice plans provide. Students manage themselves more effectively which decreases the time taken away from instruction for correction of misbehavior. This is not a prescribed plan but one that can be edited to fit many different ages, behaviors, and settings. Teachers

are more likely to use an intervention that feels comfortable to them and requires little extra time from their day. Other students would be less distracted from their own work by the off task children. There would also be great value to the amount of time saved by using choice and a smoother running classroom environment would result.

Parents can also benefit from the use of choice plans. They can adapt the choices given to problem behaviors in the home. Families with multiple children as well as a single child could see an increase in on task activities. If children have a choice as to what chore to do they may feel more responsible for it and be more apt to complete it with pride. As with the school setting, parents must set the choices appropriately for children. For example, a child should be able to show preference for a chore but not have the option of not doing one at all. Pressure would be taken off other family members if the children participate more in the home and hopefully a more peaceful environment would exist.

#### Future Studies

The ultimate goal of choice is self management. The students in this study continued to be observed after the data collection period was over. The follow up showed that the students continued to use choice method and maintained the better behavior and calmer classroom. They were better able to regulate their own behavior once they could use choice independently. Further study may be done on the effect of what happens when students are required to be more responsible for their choices instead of the teacher being the enforcer and making choices for them. The ability to regulate one's self is a necessity in society. Children in an alternative setting need remediation in

this area. Further study in this area would yield more targeted interventions for the alternative population.

A study of the long-range effects of a choice plan would also be informative. Many of the studies done, including this one, were not done for a long enough time. The choice may be working because it is still a new idea for the children. We need to see if the novelty wears off or if it stays effective with only changes in the tasks offered. A longitudinal study may also be done to track the effectiveness of the plan on children as they progress through school or into the work force. If the lesson carries with them, then the goal of self management might be able to be met through implementation of this plan.

Another future study to consider would be to use the same subjects and determine the cause of the behaviors. Similar to the study that compared the effect of choice on children driven by attention, escape, or both, these students could complete a checklist of emotions that commonly lead to misbehavior. Once data establishes a cause of the behavior, more in depth studies can be done to determine how well choice works with each type of internal motivator. Choice may work better with some populations than others which would still make it valuable, just more so to certain groups looking for behavioral interventions. A limitation to the study is that it may require the expertise of psychologists and/or behaviorists.

The choice method seems to be successful with the small sample of students in this study. It has decreased off task behavior in many students, whether they were a subject of the study or a classmate. Another study that may be of interest would be to report how improving the behavior of one problem student affects the other students in a classroom. If choice is used for the whole class like this study, the positive behavioral

effect can be attributed to either choice or the improvement of the off task child. Choice method could be implemented with only the misbehaving child but data collected about all students in the class using checklists similar to those used in this study. The other students may be more on task without an example of off task behavior. They may also be more on task due to the more efficient use of class time that used to be wasted correcting misbehaviors.

The difference between the order of items may also be of interest. Would there be a different result from a student choosing three of five possible tasks to complete in any order, than a student being given three tasks that they can do in any order? They would each have three assignments to do and both situations allow the student to pick the order of completion. What would feel like more of a choice to the student? A checklist or Likert scale would likely be needed for this study. The students would have to be used to having choices also so neither way is introduced as something new. Newness may result in a shift to that strategy and give a false result.

## Conclusion

Student choice is a behavioral intervention that has been used successfully in several settings. These range from general education classrooms to children with severe disabilities. The majority of current research shows a reduction in the amount of off task behaviors and an increase in the amount of work produced. The current study found a decrease in the behaviors of talking off topic and being out of the classroom when a choice was given. Students who participated in lesson extensions, educational materials, and classroom jobs during transition times engaged in less disruptive behaviors.

Instruction time was then more efficient since the time spent on redirection of misbehaviors was then used for knowledge exchange. This study can be extended to include many types of student in many educational settings. More research could be done on how choice leads to self management, the effect of teacher chosen versus student chosen activities, and how the cause of misbehavior affects the type of intervention that works best with individuals. This study showed that having a choice of activities during transition times reduced the amount of off task behaviors of students in ninth through twelfth grade in an alternative program.

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