

Promote Student Success During Independent Seatwork

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Rock, M. L. & Thead, B. K. (2009). Promote student success during independent seatwork. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 44 (3), 179-184.

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Abstract:

Students with learning and behavioral disorders often lack the requisite academic skills and behavioral self-control to remain engaged during passive seatwork activities. Because independent seatwork composes a large portion of the instructional time in general education classrooms and teachers expect students to demonstrate self-control in these environments, it is important to identify effective procedures to manage student behavior and increase academic involvement during such tasks. The purpose of this article is to present 20 approaches special educators can implement with general educators to do this.

Keywords: behavioral strategies; general and special education; collaboration; practices; inclusion; intervention; academic



Article:

The majority of students with learning and behavior disabilities receive all or part of their special education services in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). To promote the success of these students in integrated settings, it is imperative for educators to consider the instructional and behavioral demands that exist therein. In inclusive environments, one instructional demand relates to the use of independent seatwork, which consumes much of the academic time in math and reading (Parmar & Cawley, 1991; Vaughn, Levy, Coleman, & Bos, 2002). Behaviorally, teachers expect students to demonstrate self-control in inclusive classrooms (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). Unfortunately, students with learning and behavior disorders often lack sufficient self-control to complete passive seatwork activities and may be at heightened risk for being disengaged and lapsing into inappropriate behavior. What follows are 20 approaches that special educators can implement in cooperation with general educators to promote the academic and behavioral success of students with disabilities during independent seatwork in inclusive environments.

Implement Positive Behavior Supports

1. Develop behavioral expectations. Students who participate in the development of expectations are more likely to cooperate. Collaborate with students to identify three to five concise, positively stated expectations for seatwork. For instance, Ready is the keyword used to represent the tasks of preparing for seatwork (e.g.,

gathering paper, pencil, and books). Aim is used to signify the behavioral aspects of remaining focused (e.g., remaining in seat, working quietly on assigned tasks, keeping hands, feet, and objects to self). Fire is used to characterize the act of completing the assigned activity (e.g., review work for errors, submit completed assignments, self-praise; Rock, 2004a). Then, develop these expectations further by using a graphic organizer to task analyze them with the class or individual students. A hierarchic three-main-idea frame (i.e., graphic organizer; Ellis, 1998) helps students identify the steps or specific actions needed to demonstrate on-task behavior during independent seatwork as well as why it is important to do so (Rock, 2004b).

2. Publicize behavioral expectations. Students more readily follow expectations when they are posted publicly. To do this, construct posters to visually remind students of the specific behaviors expected during independent seatwork. Prominently post the collaboratively developed behavioral expectations (e.g., Ready, Aim, Fire) in the classroom in high-visibility areas and review the expectations daily by announcing the behavioral expectations prior to the commencement of seatwork activities (Bear, Cavalier, & Manning, 2005). Remember to incorporate graphics and/or color in the posters to enhance the appeal of the visual reminders.

3. Teach behavioral expectations by training sufficient response exemplars. Students who are taught behavioral expectations more often than not comply with their use. Scaffolding is an effective method to train sufficient response exemplars by teaching students what does and does not constitute acceptable behavior (Lane & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2004). First, the teacher should model examples and nonexamples of what on-task behavior looks like during seatwork. Then, students should be offered ample opportunities to practice the desired behavior. During practice activities, students need to receive teacher encouragement and feedback about their performance.

4. Emphasize goal setting, monitoring, and evaluation. Students who are not guided by goals are often off task and unproductive, especially when working independently. Goal orientation activities can increase students' appropriate behavior and productivity in the classroom (Graham, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1995; Quigney & Studer, 1999). During independent seatwork, goals should be aimed at increasing productivity and accuracy (e.g., "During independent math seatwork, I will complete 20 addition problems with 90% accuracy."). On the other hand, behavior-specific goals should target improved attention to task (e.g., "My goal is to remain focused and earn six checks during independent math seatwork."). Academic and behavioral goal statements should be attainable, specific, and stated positively to maximize student success (Rock, 2004b).

5. Create a whole-class self-monitoring system. Students are frequently off task because they do not have the responsibility of self-checking their academic and behavioral performance. Self-monitoring is one method in which students learn to assume responsibility for their behavior and play a primary role in changing it (Mitchem & Young, 2001). To use a whole-class approach to self-monitoring during independent math seatwork, teach students to self-check attention to the assigned task as well as academic productivity. For instance, students can record the number of problems completed correctly at the sound of a timer (e.g., every 5 minutes). Simultaneously, students can monitor their attention by comparing it to a self-modeling photograph, depicting on-task behavior, at each 5- min interval. If their real behavior resembles their photographed behavior (i.e., their ideal behavior), instruct the students to check yes on their self-monitoring sheet. If not, they are to check no. In this way, students can self-check their academic productivity as well as their attention to the assigned task at regularly scheduled or varied intervals during seatwork.

6. Teach students to self-graph. When students fail to see improvement in their performance, they are at risk for returning to inappropriate behaviors. Graphs are one tool that offers students a visual representation of their academic and behavioral progress during independent seatwork. Students can graph their academic and/or behavioral performance manually or with the aid of technology (i.e., graphing software). Students should graph their performance data following each independent seatwork session and evaluate their progress toward desired goal attainment (Gunter, Miller, Venn, Thomas, & House, 2002). Because graphs can capture small changes in students' performance, they often serve as powerful motivators.



7. Make use of effective praise (i.e., “catch students being good”). Student motivation can wane during independent seatwork if efforts to complete the assigned task go unrecognized. Teacher praise is one method by which teachers can systematically acknowledge student effort during seatwork. To be effective, teacher praise must be delivered immediately and contingently on the occurrence of the desired student behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). The quality and quantity of teacher praise are also important. A continuous stream of warm, enthusiastic, and sincere praise is more effective than infrequently delivered monotone or half-hearted statements. The goal is to gradually fade the use of continuous teacher praise and teach students how to use positive self-talk in its place. The power of teacher praise is also enhanced when such statements are precisely descriptive, such as, “You are doing a much better job today sitting in your chair, working quietly, staying focused, and completing your work, Sarah. Way to go!” To ensure effective use of teacher praise during independent seatwork, audio-tape several sessions and evaluate your ability (Sutherland, Copeland, & Wehby, 2001).

8. Implement effective consequences. When students’ undesired behavior during independent seatwork is not addressed, then it is likely to worsen over time. Use consequences effectively to decrease undesired student behavior during independent seatwork. Consequences should be defined clearly, enforced consistently, implemented sequentially, and delivered privately using a soft, neutral tone (Grossman, 2004). For instance, when the student is disengaged, he or she initially receives a private verbal warning from the teacher. If undesired behavior continues, then the teacher calmly and matter-of-factly imposes a response-cost condition wherein the student must finish incomplete assignments during free time. Finally, if off-task behavior remains chronic, the teacher sends a confidential letter home and requests a parent–teacher conference to develop a more intensive, individualized behavior intervention.

Engineer Environmental Supports

9. Limit use of independent seatwork time. When students are expected to engage in independent seatwork for extended periods of time (e.g., 30 or 45 min), they are more likely to disengage from the task at hand. To maximize student attention during this time, structure the class schedule so that independent seatwork is interspersed throughout the day for shorter periods of time (e.g., 10 or 15 min). Limiting the time students are required to work on long independent tasks decreases frustration and increases the likelihood of completion and success (Sweeney & LeBlanc, 1996).

10. Be mindful of seating arrangements. Students who are seated in close proximity to one another are tempted to engage in off-task behaviors. During independent seatwork, traditional rows reign supreme, whereas circles are useful for facilitating class discussions and desk clusters for promoting interaction during collaborative tasks (Hastings & Schwieso, 1995). Classroom furniture configurations can be changed periodically throughout the day. Tennis balls can be secured on the legs of desks and chairs to minimize noise and facilitate movement. Moreover, students who are the most likely to engage in high rates of disengaged or disruptive behavior should be seated closest to the teacher during independent seatwork activities (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 2003).

11. Deliver concise instructions. When students are confused by the directions to complete an assigned task they are likely to avoid engaging in it. Moreover, if students do not hear or fail to listen to the directions for independent seatwork tasks, then they are at risk for needing increased teacher assistance, being off task, or completing the task incorrectly. To prevent this undesired chain of behavioral events from occurring, it is important to gain the students' full attention before delivering instructions orally. To ensure clarity, keep verbal instructions brief and present them to students in a step-like manner. Pair the instructions with simple visual cues to ease student understanding. Remember to include a backup system such as providing the written instructions on the assigned task, posting them in highly visible classroom locations, and audiotaping so students can review them as needed during independent seatwork activities (Wood, 2002).

12. Incorporate self-modeling (picture) prompts. Photographs of the behavioral expectations help students differentiate between on-task and off-task behavior during seatwork and improve their reliability when self-monitoring. To do this, take pictures of the student when he or she is focused intensely on completing a task and place the pictures where they can serve as a constant visual reminder (e.g., on the desk, on the self-monitoring sheets). This practice may also reduce the need for repeated teacher verbal prompts and redirection (Lazarus, 1998).

13. Provide signaling devices. Students are frequently out of seat when they need to access teacher assistance during independent seatwork. One way to prevent this from occurring is to place signaling devices on students' desks (Kerr & Nelson, 2002). Students can create their own signaling devices by decorating a can. For instance, half of the can is covered in red paper and the other half in green. When the red portion of the can is placed in the upright position, then the teacher knows that the student needs attention.



14. Engage in continuous monitoring. Students whose behavior is not monitored closely are in danger of succumbing to non-task-related temptations (e.g., talking, toying with objects, drawing). Thus, active teacher supervision is needed during seat-work activities. Try to refrain from being seated at the teacher's desk during this time. Instead, circulate frequently and offer students assistance, encouragement, correction, and feedback. Increased levels of supervision and physical proximity not only prevent disruptive behaviors, but also allow students increased opportunities for academic support (Gunter, Shores, & Susan, 1995; Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001).

Provide Instructional Supports

15. Use engaging materials and purposeful tasks. Students are likely to become bored and engage in off-task behavior when presented with dull, uninteresting seatwork materials and tasks (e.g., worksheet after worksheet). Seatwork materials and tasks should be varied by type and format to maximize student interest. Replace poorly constructed worksheets with well-designed ones that incorporate color, organization, examples, and directions. Laminate or place the revised materials in sheet protectors and allow students to use dry erase markers to complete the assignment. Consider file folder activities (e.g., folders prefilled with multilevel activities) as

another example of engaging seatwork activities that offer students additional, appropriate independent practice opportunities. Educational games (e.g., a deck of cards to rehearse math skills) also provide students with appropriate independent seatwork activities for a wide range of skills (Olson & Platt, 2004).

16. Focus on fluency. Students become frustrated by an independent academic task that is too difficult and as a result give up trying to complete it. Independent seatwork activities should be designed so that students are practicing skills in which they previously received teacher-guided instruction (Choate, 2000). Follow up instructionally appropriate independent seatwork tasks with similar homework activities so the students receive additional opportunity to practice newly acquired skills.

17. Provide appropriate modifications and accommodations. Many students with disabilities lack the necessary academic skills to complete independent seatwork tasks without continuous teacher assistance. Independent seatwork assignments should be presented to all students using clear and well-defined formats. Provide accommodations such as word banks, sentence starters, manipulatives, and number lines to students who lack the academic skills for successful assignment completion. Remember that the purpose of offering this type of support is to lessen the impact of the disability on independent learning tasks (Coleman, 2005). Consider gradual removal of such supports as students' basic skill proficiency increases. Also, use environmental modifications such as study carrels to facilitate students' focus on seatwork assignments. Be cautious not to let this type of modification become socially stigmatizing. One way to avoid this undesirable outcome is to make the carrels available for all students to use during independent practice activities.

18. Supply self-correcting materials. Students who receive infrequent or delayed feedback regarding their independent seatwork often continue to make academic errors. Thus, they are vulnerable to being trapped in a paralyzing cycle of repeated frustration and chronic failure during which their attention to a task is liable to falter. To provide students with immediate and frequent instructional feedback during seatwork activities, furnish them with self-correcting materials. These materials can include answer keys, assignment-related rubrics, or checklists. Offer students the use of technological devices such as calculators or handheld spelling computers to supplement seatwork materials. Doing so affords students valuable opportunities to monitor their work, self-check their accuracy, and enhance their accountability (Friend & Bursick, 1999).

19. Teach time management and learning strategies. Students who are unable to use their time wisely or who fail to approach a task systematically often experience ongoing difficulties with independent seatwork and are likely to prematurely abandon the assigned task. Teachers can reduce student frustration and increase student engagement during independent seatwork by explicitly teaching students organizational skills. Teach students how to deliberately plan efficient use of their seatwork time by reviewing assigned activities, prioritizing what needs to be done, and constructing a to-do list to guide independent task completion. Learning strategies also furnish students with deliberate approaches to tackling an assigned task. For instance, use mnemonics and keywords (e.g., DRAW: Discover the sign, Read the problem, Answer or draw and check, Write the answer) during independent seatwork activities to help students remember problem-solving steps (Harris, Miller, & Mercer, 1995; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Supply students with cue cards containing the strategy steps to ensure their use.



20. Establish real-world connections. Students who fail to understand why it is important to complete a task are less likely to do so. Some researchers suggest that for individuals to achieve their goals they need to view them as salient to their future (Oettingen, Honig, & Gollwitzer, 2000). Thus, it is critical to help students learn the connection between their seatwork and their bigger-picture or day-to-day life goals (Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005). For instance, if a student's bigger-picture life goal is to become a millionaire, then help him or her understand how and why remaining focused and productive during math independent seatwork helps his or her achievement of that goal.

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