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## The Relationship between Classroom Distractions and Off-Task Students

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# **The Relationship between Classroom Distractions and Off-Task Students**

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## **Overview**

This study focuses on the prevalence of classroom distractions in elementary education candidates' field experiences. Classroom disturbances challenge students' ability to focus on, and process the information that is being taught (Frisby, et al. 2018). Disturbances can occur for a variety of reasons. Intentional distractions, or anti-citizenship behaviors are classroom disturbances that are created by students with the goal of distracting others (Myers, et al. 2015). Classroom disturbances can also be unintentional, yet still equally distracting.

Throughout the duration of this research, the candidates have conducted observations and research in a variety of grade levels. In this paper, the candidates will compare and contrast their findings from each segment of time spent in the field, including COVID-19 data. From this comparison, the candidates will make note of similarities and their relevant significance from the research. The insights gleaned from this study have implications for all elementary teachers. By limiting the possible sources of distraction, teachers can more readily improve students' focus, attention, and their overall engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Classroom Distractions***

Classroom distractions occur on a daily basis and prevent students from being fully engaged with their teacher's instruction. Classroom disturbances challenge students' ability to focus on, and process the information that is being taught (Frisby, et al. 2018). Disturbances can

occur for a variety of reasons. Intentional distractions, or anti-citizenship behaviors are classroom disturbances that are created by students with the goal of distracting others (Myers, et al. 2015). Classroom disturbances can also be unintentional, yet still equally distracting. Classroom distractions remain an inevitable, and detrimental aspect of a student's education; teachers who know why their students are off-task are better positioned to limit the distractions in the first place, and thereby create learning experiences that hold students' attention for extended periods of time.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Context***

This study took place in Horry County, South Carolina. Horry County School District includes 56 schools and is the third-largest school district in South Carolina. It serves over 45,000 students district-wide. Horry County has a district wide mission statement as follows, "Horry County Schools' vision is to be a premier, world-class school system in which every student acquires an excellent education. Our schools will be welcoming centers organized around high-quality teaching and learning."

Six classrooms of 2nd, 3rd 4th and 5th grade students were observed over the course of three semesters between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 with each field experience lasting between four and 12 weeks long. Each observation was done in the morning time between 7:30am and 11:30am. The observations took place in different classroom and school settings with a varying number of students present in each classroom, however they all resided in the same district. Each researcher made six scans during a 30 minute observation period (i.e., one scan every five minutes). In each scan, the researcher first recorded the number of students who were off-task or distracted; they also identified the possible source of the distraction, according to the following

categories: announcements/phone calls, traffic in/out of the classroom, peers, objects, other, the teacher, and off-task without a distraction.

**Data Coding**

Below is a sample of the chart used to collect and separate data. The chart was compiled through a series of meetings during which the common areas of which distractions can occur were discussed. The chart was then tested for a semester prior to collecting data to determine its validity and reliability. The chart was changed to reflect the possible distractions observers saw in the prior semester.

In order to code data as accurately as possible, all observers sat and watched a sample video of a classroom observation in order to code the distractions as accurately as possible. It was discussed what behaviors would be categorized as what distraction and how to properly use the chart for data coding. Changes were made to the chart as needed. All changes are reflected in the data.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Total Number of Students \_\_\_\_\_ Observer \_\_\_\_\_

Announcements/Phone Call						
Traffic In/Out of Classroom						
Peers						
Objects						
Teacher						
Other						
Off-Task w/o Distraction						
Total Number of Students Off-Task						

Each category has its own description to explain what a tally in that column may represent. *Announcements/phone calls* will represent any announcement from the school or the classroom phone being called and answered. *Traffic in/out of the classroom* is speaking of students, faculty, or visitors entering or leaving the classroom for any purpose other than whole class transitional times such as switching classes for upper elementary. Any mark in the *peers* category shows classmates are talking, being disruptive, or making gestures/moving around. The student may also be involved with talking to their peers. *Objects* refers to any item at their desk that the student is fidgeting with or they are moving around the room to sharpen a pencil or retrieve a material including but not limited to pencils, jackets, books or manipulatives that are not being utilized for instructional purposes at the time of distraction. The chart also identifies *Teacher* as a category in which the teacher is rewarding or reprimanding another student or the teacher may also be talking with other staff in the hallway. In this section the teacher directly becomes a source of distraction. There is a category that is listed as *Other* for all unexpected accidents or events that may distract a student. Weather and or special occasions that have students excited and unfocused. Students can also be considered *off- task w/o distraction* in which the student is not on task but does not have a source of distraction such as noticing a student daydreaming or staring off.

\*\* *off task without distraction* was changed to *self distraction* after the first semester

## Findings

### *Fall 2019 Data by Classroom*

In the Fall of 2019, two different classrooms were observed over the course of four weeks. The grades were fifth grade and fourth grade at different schools. When the data were compiled it was found that the top three distractions between the two classrooms were *objects*, *peers*, and *traffic in/out of the classroom*. The objects included I-Pads, jackets, bookbags and pencils. We found that peer distractions reflected ineffective group work, talking about non academic topics and switching seats. The third biggest direction was traffic in and out of the classroom which was due to interventions, bathroom procedures, administration, guests, mascots, roaming the room, etc.

Total Amount of Distractions Per Category				
Category	Number of Students Distracted			
Announcements/ Phone Calls	0	Time Observation Recorded:		
Traffic In/Out Of the Classroom	9	5th grade- 8:50 to 9:35		
Peers	25			
Objects	36	Number of Observations:		
Teacher	3	4 weeks		
Other	1			
Off-Task w/o Distraction	2	Observer:		
Total Number of Students	76	Kennedy Harrison		

Total Number of Student Distractions Per Category				
Category	Number of Students Distracted			
Announcements /Phone Calls	1		Time Observation Recorded:	
Traffic In/Out Of the Classroom	17		4th grade 7:50 to 8:20	
Peers	7			
Objects	8		Number of Observations:	
Teacher	7		4 weeks	
Other	5			
Off-Task w/o Distraction	8		Observer:	
Total Number of Students	53		Michelle Andrus	

### ***Spring 2020 Data by Classroom***

In Spring 2020 the data is limited due to unforeseen circumstances that caused a break in data collection. Data collection was interrupted by COVID-19, which resulted in the cancellation of all PK-12 classrooms as of March 2020. Below are the data that were able to be collected. The chart represents three different observations by the same observer in a 3rd grade classroom prior to COVID disruptions. It is shown that based on the one classroom with limited observations the biggest causes of distraction was *objects*, followed closely by *peers* and *self distraction*.

Total Number of Student Distractions Per Category				
Category	Number of Students Distracted			
Announcements /Phone Calls	1		Time Observation Recorded:	
Traffic In/Out Of the Classroom	4		3rd Grade 7:50 AM to 8:20 pm	
Peers	11			
Objects	14		Number/Period of Observations:	
Teacher	5		3 Observations (Feburary)	
Other	2			
Self-Distraction	7		Observer:	
Total Number of Students	44		Michelle Andrus	

### ***Fall 2020 Data - \*\*COVID CLASSROOM\*\****

In Fall 2020, three classrooms were observed in a fifth grade, second grade, and third grade placement. Below are the data that were able to be collected. The chart represents all the observations taken by each observer over the course of a four-week field experience. The

bottom chart is separated in A Day and B Day findings, as students attended school on rotating schedules. The first chart has the number of distracted students combined into one chart. It is shown that the top three causes are *peers*, *objects* and *self distraction*.

Total Number of Student Distractions Per Category			
Category	Number of Students Distracted		
Announcements /Phone Calls	2	Grade Level Observed	
Traffic In/Out Of the Classroom	14	Second Grade	
Peers	2		
Objects	13	Number/Period of Observations:	
Teacher	2	3 Weeks (October)	
Other	0		
Self Distraction	9	Observer:	
Total Number of Students in All	42	Kennedy Harrison	

Total Number of Student Distractions Per Category			
Category	Number of Students Distracted		
	Group A	Group B	
Announcements /Phone Calls	0	0	Time Observation Recorded:
Traffic In/Out Of the Classroom	1	1	5th Grade GT ELA 8:40-9:10
Peers	4	12	
Objects	8	8	Number/Period of Observation:
Teacher	11	9	3 Weeks (October)
Other	0	0	
Self Distraction	17	8	Observer:
Total Number of Students Per Group	41	38	Michelle Andrus
Total Number of Students in All	79		

### Implications

Upon conclusion of the study, we found that each semester between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 had essentially the same findings. To reduce distractions in a classroom, there are helpful tricks and tools to put in place. For example, in a non-COVID 19 setting, teachers could have pencil and/or supply bins in the middle of grouped tables to reduce the amount of student distraction with objects inside their desks. Unique tools like a FootFidget or a TheraBand allow



students to stay focused and moving without distracting others. Teachers can keep the décor minimal, organized and educational with little to no hanging or moving objects. Activities should be geared toward student interests including visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles. Students can be taught to use hand signals when asking to go to the bathroom or sharpening a pencil to reduce conversation and noise. Although there are always going to be distractions in the classroom, sometimes children require a unique resource to help combat any diversions.

### References

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