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INDIRECT FACILITATION OF ON-TASK BEHAVIOR PRODUCED BY CONTINGENT FREE-TIME FOR ACADEMIC PRODUCTIVITY[1]

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This study investigated the relationship between on-task behavior and the academic performance of three low achieving and disruptive children in an elementary school special-education class. A number of researchers have postulated that the *direct* elimination of off-task or disruptive behavior is a necessary prior requirement when increases in academic performance are sought in special-education classrooms composed of low achievers with below-average socioeconomic environments. The present research program investigated this issue and measured the incidence of on-task behavior and its relationship to changes in the performance of a variety of academic tasks brought about by the opportunity to engage in daily free-time activities. Three children from a class of eight "educably mentally handicapped" students were chosen as target subjects, as their repertoires seemed to be especially defective. These children were observed by the first author for 90-minute sessions three days a week, and data regarding on-task behavior were obtained by the use of an interval recording technique. In conjunction with the teacher, the first author also monitored the academic performance of the children in six structured activities—answer completion from boardwork instructions, task completion from handout assignments, comprehension of reading assignments and vocabulary recognition, accuracy of direction-following to audiotaped instructions, quality of copied handwriting, and the matching of appropriate phonetic sounds to pictured objects and situations. Following baseline sessions during which both on-task and academic performance was measured, several experimental sessions were conducted during which free-time was given noncontingently. During these sessions, no reliable changes in student performance were observed. Subsequently, the teacher and experimenters defined a specified percentage of correct completion of each of the six categories of skill performance as necessary for the achievement of the free-time reinforcer, during each experimental session. As a result, both the academic productivity and the on-task measures of behavior were observed to increase, even though reinforcement was not directly contingent upon on-task behavior. The subsequent reinstitution of noncontingent free-time was followed by lower rates of both output and on-task behavior. The final reintroduction of contingent free-time for academic productivity again produced substantial increases in both work accomplished correctly *and* on-task behavior. Corresponding increases in productivity were noted for most nontarget children as well. While the present investigation has shown a high correspondence between productivity and on-task behavior, we must keep in mind that on-task behavior can be defined in many different ways. It remains possible that differences in the degree of correlation between outcome measures and the topography of "work" activity may relate to the degree to which the specific on-task behaviors measured are actually *required* for the outcome behavior. The failure of many researchers to identify a direct relationship between "appearances" and output may be inherently a measurement problem.

DESCRIPTORS: academic behavior, attending behavior, classroom behavior, disruptive behavior, free-time activities, contingent reinforcement, noncontingent reinforcement, elementary students

[1]The full text of this manuscript is deposited with the National Auxiliary Publications Service (NAPS). For copies, order NAPS Document #03174. Order from ASIS/NAPS Co., C/O Microfiche Publications, 305 East 46th Street, New York, New York 10017. Remit with order for each copy $6.00 for microfiche or $3.00 for photocopies. Make checks payable to Microfiche Publications.

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