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Learning-Related Behaviors: Small Group Reading Instruction in the General Education Classroom

Stacy L. Weiss, PhD[1]

Abstract

Supplemental small group reading instruction is frequently provided in the general education setting to struggling students at elementary schools that use response to intervention frameworks. Although building reading proficiency is the main focus of the intervention, students' learning-related behaviors should also be addressed to improve their engagement and participation. These learning-related behaviors include staying on-task, following directions, persisting when an activity becomes difficult, and working independently. This article describes five evidence-based strategies that can be used with students who participate in small groups for reading instruction and also struggle with learning-related behaviors. The five strategies include (a) teaching small group rules explicitly, (b) providing multiple opportunities to respond through choral responding and response cards, (c) using high-probability requests, (d) training students to self-monitor attention, and (e) praising appropriate behaviors. Specific examples for implementation and suggestions for evaluating the effectiveness of the interventions are provided.

Keywords

behavior, response to intervention, reading instruction

A response to intervention (RTI) framework is frequently used to identify and provide an increasing intensity of support to struggling readers. Students who experience difficulty learning to read will initially receive additional support in the general education classroom. This support often includes targeted reading interventions in a small group setting (Bender & Shores, 2007). Although this

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small group environment is designed to teach students how to read, it also provides an opportunity to develop students' learning-related behaviors including attending to task, following directions, persisting with challenging tasks, and working independently. Difficulty with these behaviors in early elementary school is associated with low reading achievement (Morgan, Farkas, Tufis, & Sperling, 2008). Students who have difficulty with these behaviors may also make limited progress even when participating in intensive reading interventions through small group instruction (Torgesen et al., 2001). In addition to addressing struggling students' reading needs, it is equally important to teach them how to actively participate in instruction.

These small reading groups can be taught by instructors other than the general education classroom teacher, including paraprofessionals. To teach effectively, paraprofessionals need to be knowledgeable about research-based reading interventions and behavioral strategies that support student learning (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007). There are research-based guidelines for providing social behavioral support within an RTI framework (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lanthrop, 2007); however, more information is needed about specific behavioral strategies to address learning-related behaviors in a small group setting. This article describes five evidence-based strategies to support learning-related behaviors that can readily be incorporated into small-group reading instruction.

Strategies for Teaching Learning-Related Behaviors

Even in small groups that have a clearly defined and consistent structure with research-based reading instruction, some students will need additional support from the instructor to stay on-task and actively participate in the group. Instead of frequent redirection, instructors need proactive and positive strategies to teach learning-related behaviors. Five strategies that can promote positive student learning-related behaviors are discussed. First, basic rules and routines should be explicitly taught and reviewed regularly. Choral responses and response cards provide students multiple opportunities to respond during teacher-led instruction when learning new information and skills. Self-monitoring of attention during independent activities supports students' engagement during review and maintenance activities. High-probability requests can help students attempt tasks that have previously been difficult. Finally, increasing the use of specific praise can provide a student with more feedback about his or her learning-related behaviors, in addition to his or her reading performance.

Develop and Teach Group Rules

Even though the general education classroom maintains a set of overall classroom behavior expectations and rules, small group instructors should also develop specific rules for the group. These rules should be worded positively and focus on what should be done, rather than what should not occur. An example of a set of rules might be (a) follow directions, (b) raise your hand, (c) stay on-task, and (d) come to group prepared. Instructors should take time to explicitly teach students how to follow the rules that have been developed for the group (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

The first step to teaching the rules is to operationally define the desired behaviors. For example, if the rule is *be on-task*, this behavior should be clearly defined. In a small reading group, on-task may include looking at the speaker, reading aloud, or following along in a book and asking and answering questions. Second, instructors should provide examples of the appropriate behaviors and illustrations of noncompliance with the rule (Walker et al., 1995). After the specific behavior has been discussed, the instructor and students should practice being on- and off-task. For example, the instructor and students practice being on-task by following along in the text with their eyes and tracing the text with their finger, while another student reads. This positive example should be followed by the group demonstrating off-task behaviors such as looking around the room and talking to a neighbor instead of reading silently. After the examples of off-task behaviors, the group should discuss why that behavior was not following the rules.

The desired behavior can be made more explicit and memorable by providing a mnemonic device. One example is a variation of the SLANT strategy (Ellis, 1989): *S*it up, *L*ean forward, *A*sk and answer questions, *N*od your head when you understand, and *T*rack the speaker with your eyes. At the beginning of the small group instruction, the instructor can ask all students to SLANT and provide feedback on the students' behaviors. During the small group session, the instructor can praise for appropriate behavior or remind students to SLANT.

To maintain a positive small group environment, instructors should review the rules at the beginning of the instruction group until students are familiar with them and have incorporated them into the daily routine. The discussion of small group rules is not limited to the first few group sessions. The rules need to be restated and reviewed when there is a change in the typical routine of the classroom or school. In addition, when students are excited about upcoming events or breaks in the school schedule, group time will be well spent setting clear expectations and reviewing how to follow group rules.

Provide Multiple Opportunities for Students to Respond to Instruction

In addition to establishing, practicing, and following rules consistently, it is important to actively engage students in a reading lesson. A key factor in maintaining students' attention and monitoring their understanding is to allow for multiple opportunities and response modes for students to demonstrate their mastery of the lesson's objectives. There are several ways to increase students' active interaction with instruction including classwide peer tutoring (Arreaga-Mayer, 1998) and frequent questioning. These questions can relate to story plot, main ideas and details, characterization, vocabulary, or build background knowledge.

In a small group setting, instructors can use frequent questions to assess student learning, draw attention to important information, and help students stay on-task. One questioning procedure is choral responding, which involves students verbally answering a question at the same time (Haydon, Mancil, & Van Loan, 2009). Although it is a relatively easy strategy to implement, multiple students giving verbal answers at the same time can make it difficult for instructors to monitor individual responses. Instead, students can use response cards or erasable white boards to write answers to questions (e.g., "Which character was most helpful to Charlotte?"). This practice encourages frequent student participation and is related to greater academic gains than students answering questions individually (Randolph, 2007). In addition, response cards encourage individual accountability and strengthen the connection between reading and writing. Erasable response cards easily can be used to answer different types of questions including those with multiple correct answers (Heward et al., 1996). However, it can be difficult for a student to recall an answer from memory when he or she is learning something new.

Preprinted response cards allow students to recognize rather than generate the answer to a question, which can be helpful for emerging skills (Randolph, 2007). Students in the group can use a premade card with letters *A* through *D* printed in each corner (see Figure 1). The instructor reads a multiple-choice question, and students hold up the card so the letter corresponding with the correct answer is on top (Heward et al., 1996). In response to words called out by the instructor, students could hold up the correct sight word. Cards preprinted with *yes* or *no* are used to respond to true–false questions. Although the number of possible answers and the types of questions are limited with preprinted response cards, they allow for quicker responses. Either type of card will increase student interactions with the instructor (Randolph, 2007).

Regardless of the type of response required (e.g., choral response, written response on a small white board, preprinted response), the key to success with response cards is asking good questions. Multiple-choice questions should be carefully constructed. The stem should be phrased as a concise question rather than a fill-in-the-blank statement (Clay, 2001). The three or four possible responses should include one word or short phrases of similar length. For students with language difficulties, it can be confusing if the response includes terms such as *none of the above* or if the stem includes words such as *not* and *never* (Clay, 2001). Example questions are presented in Table 1. Open-ended questions can also be developed for choral responses or written response cards.

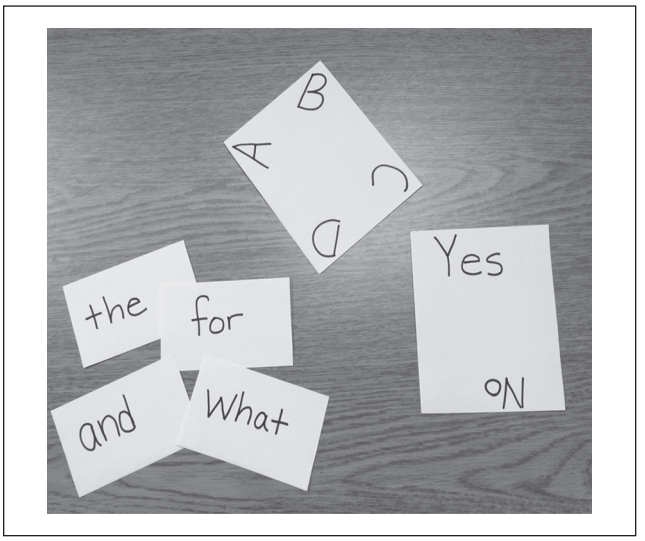

Figure 1. Response cards for multiple-choice questions, yes–no questions, and sight words.

It is often difficult to develop questions in the midst of teaching. As a result, instructors should write some questions in advance to make sure they are clearly worded and address the necessary skills students should develop (Bond, 2007). Questions should be challenging, but students who have been struggling should experience a high rate of success (Bond, 2007). This practice will encourage participation and help build a positive relationship with reading. Overall, providing students with multiple questions about the text and interactions with the material will help facilitate understanding and engagement.

Use High-Probability Requests With Difficult Tasks

In small-group reading instruction, students will often need to work on skills that they have not yet mastered through prior instruction. As a result, the instructor will frequently ask students to do something that has previously been difficult. Understandably, students might resist completing or even attempting these activities because of their previous failure or their lack of confidence in their reading skills.

Table 1. Types of Response Questions That Can Be Used With Bread and Jam for Francis.

Question	Possible Answers
At breakfast, what did Francis refuse to eat?	a. Cereal b. A pancake c. An egg d. Toast
After many meals of eating bread and jam, how did Francis most likely feel?	a. Happy to eat more jam for breakfast. b. Envious that everyone else enjoyed dinner. c. Excited about her bread and jam for lunch. d. Annoyed that her sister laughed at dinner.

To help overcome this challenge, instructors first ask the student to complete activities that are easy and likely to be done (i.e., high-probability requests). Then instructors make requests to do similar but less desirable or more difficult activities that the student would typically not do (i.e., low-probability request). Making high-probability requests increases the likelihood that the low-probability request will be complied with since the student is already used to following directions (Lee, Belfiore, & Budin, 2008). For example, a student has previously refused to read a book when asked, but he or she accurately and easily identifies words and punctuation within a story. The instructor could ask the student to point to the word *is*, a question mark, and the first word in the sentence before asking him or her to begin reading. This series of requests should come in quick succession, with no more than 10 seconds between each request (Lee, 2005).

To determine which requests are high-probability and which are low-probability, instructors observe or interview the student about preferred activities and follow up with empirical validation (Lee et al., 2008). Empirical validation involves presenting the student with two similar activities that involve the same amount of work. For example, a student can choose between saying the sounds of nine letters individually or reading three 3-letter words. Variations of these tasks are presented five times. Whichever activity is selected by the student at least four of the five times is the high-probability task and can be placed first to increase the likelihood of completing the low-probability task (Lee et al., 2008). The key is to select activities the student will consistently perform.

The use of high-probability requests is not limited to initiating student involvement at the beginning of an activity. They can also support reengagement with a task when a student stops working in the middle of an activity. For example, if a student stops writing, the instructor can ask him or her to write three sight words before asking him or her to finish writing the story (Lee & Laspe, 2003). the conclusion.

Making high-probability requests should gradually be faded until the student does the low probability request without additional prompts (Lee et al., 2008). Using high-probability requests can increase the time it takes to complete an activity; however, if a student is not completing the work or taking longer than expected to do it, the initial extra time may be warranted (Lee, 2006). The use of the high probability requests can help break the cycle of noncompliance with directions and refusal to persist with a difficult task.

Teach Students to Self-Monitor

Response cards can easily be incorporated into instructor-led instruction that is common in small-group reading instruction. There will be times when students need to work independently during small group meetings. Self-monitoring is a flexible strategy used to increase the on-task behaviors of students in a variety of settings (Reid, 1996). This strategy is useful when a student knows how to complete a task, but he or she is not doing it independently. During reading groups, this may involve review activities to help students maintain their skills such as completing a phonics review worksheet, writing spelling words for practice, or reading silently.

Self-monitoring of attention involves having students regularly ask themselves if they were paying attention to what they were doing. The definition of paying attention is task-specific and should include observable behaviors. For example, when reading silently students should be looking at a book in the correct orientation while turning pages. Students are initially prompted to ask themselves "Am I paying attention?" by an external cue. As students learn to frequently reassess if they are on-task, the external cues are gradually faded (Hallahan & Sapona, 1983).

There are several considerations regarding the implementation of self-monitoring. First is the type of cue used to prompt the self-questioning. The cue type is dependent on the setting and the availability of the instructor. If disruption to other students is not a concern, students may receive an auditory cue (Hallahan, Marshall, & Lloyd, 1981). Other cues include a verbal comment from the instructor (Blick & Test, 1987) and a tone from a timer (Patton, Jolivette, & Ramsey, 2006). If these sounds are problematic in a small group environment, a tactile cue from an adult (Maag, Rutherford, & DiGangi, 1992) or a vibrating cue from a pager or similar device can be used (Amato-Zech, Hoff, & Doepke, 2006). Next, the length of time between cues should be planned. Random intervals are preferable, but not always practical. Random intervals should initially have an average of one cue every 45 seconds with a range of 10 to 90 seconds (Hallahan & Sapona, 1983). Once a stable pattern of increased on-task behavior has been established, the external cue is gradually faded. Intervals lengthen as students get in

the habit of asking themselves if they are on-task, and the use of the recording device and prompts can be faded over time (Webber, Scheuermann, McCall, & Coleman, 1993). Third is the consideration if students should record their self-evaluations (Maag et al., 1992). The recording procedure may involve writing yes or no on a chart, clicking a wrist counter, or circling a smiling or frowning face (Daly & Ranalli, 2003; Gulchak, 2008; Hallahan & Sapona, 1983; Maag et al., 1992). It is not necessary for students to be accurate in their recording for the intervention to be effective (Hallahan & Lloyd, 1987). Fourth, to promote student engagement and motivation, students can graph their performance (DiGangi, Maag, & Rutherford, 1991). Overall, self-monitoring can help students take greater control over their on-task and learning-related behavior.

Praise Appropriate Behavior

Instructors also need to provide feedback to students on their demonstration of appropriate learning-related behaviors. These simple, meaningful statements should address the behaviors the instructor wants the student to continue (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo, 2009). When done correctly, praise can increase students' on-task behavior (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). Although it is a seemingly simple suggestion, providing effective praise is more involved than just telling students they did a good job (Brophy, 1981).

There are several guidelines to make praise more meaningful. First, the instructor should use praise in situations when students successfully accomplished something that was previously difficult and when their performance was the result of effort or skill rather than luck (Brophy, 1981). In particular, when students are just learning how to attend to a task, follow directions, or complete routines, the instructor should want to praise the students frequently (Conroy et al., 2009). Second, the instructor should sincerely and clearly state what was correct about the behavior displayed by the students (Brophy, 1981). For example, if after several days of being unprepared, students brought their pencil and clipboard to the small group and sat on their mat without being prompted, the instructor could reply, "Good job coming to the reading group with your materials and being ready to work!" In addition to verbal praise, instructors can use nonverbal indications of correct performance including smiling and gestures such as thumbs-up. Finally, praising students after the group session and later in the day for their previous behavior will indicate to the students that their behavior was positive and memorable to the instructor.

It can be difficult for instructors to know if their praise is effective and being delivered in a consistently genuine, specific, and enthusiastic manner. For instructors who struggle to effectively and frequently deliver praise, a colleague observing and providing the instructor with feedback can help increase the use of praise (Simonsen, Myers, & DeLuca, 2010). This type of support is more beneficial than just providing training about praise to the instructor. If it is not possible to have an additional observer, instructors identify the number of statements they would like to make about student behavior during small group and then record their lesson to determine if they were able to meet that goal (Conroy et al., 2009). To use praise effectively, instructors will need to make a concerted effort to increase their positive statements to students.

Summary

Incorporating these five practices can support student learning by helping them become engaged and actively involved in small group instruction. Although seemingly straightforward, these strategies will take time to implement effectively. Developing and teaching a set of rules is a good first step to set clear expectations. Instructors should then consider carefully what students are having the most difficulty with and focus on a strategy to address that need first. For example, if students' attention is frequently lost during discussions led by the instructor, using frequent questions with response cards will help maintain their attention and engagement. Instructors should gradually introduce and master the strategy with their students before introducing another strategy into their repertoire. Implementing the strategies effectively includes strategically considering the use of those practices.

Evaluating Learning-Related Behaviors Strategies

Two types of assessments are needed to evaluate the learning-related behavior strategies. First, instructors need to assess the correct implementation of the strategies, and second, they need to evaluate the impact of the strategies on student behavior. Although an observation by a colleague is ideal in determining efficacy with the intervention or to evaluate a change in student behavior, this is not always feasible since it requires one person to observe in a systematic and frequent manner while another teaches (Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman, Sassu, LaFrance, & Patwa, 2007). As a result, instructors need a variety of ways to assess their practices and student behavior.

Evaluating Strategy Implementation

To judge if an intervention is implemented effectively, another colleague with knowledge of the strategy could observe and provide specific feedback. Instructors could pair up to evaluate each other. This type of observation is useful if the instructor seeks support with specific aspects of an intervention such as the timing of high-probability requests, the quality of questions asked with response cards, or the perceived sincerity of praise. The observer should give feedback about what was positive about the implementation and

Rules and Routines	
Are the rules positively stated?	☐
Are there 3 to 5 rules?	☐
Have the behaviors been clearly defined?	☐
Have students practiced examples and nonexamples?	☐
Has the importance of following the rules been explained?	☐
Have students received feedback about their implementation of the rules?	☐
Are students frequently praised for following the rules?	☐
Are any recent changes in the schedule prompting the need to review rules?	☐
Are the rules retaught after long breaks in the school calendar?	☐
Multiple opportunities to respond	
Are students responding at the same time or waiting for others to answer first?	☐
Are all students giving an answer?	☐
Do students know what kind of response is expected?	☐
Are questions clearly stated with a specific answer?	☐
Is enough wait time provided to process the language of the questions?	☐
Are students using the response materials inappropriately?	☐
Are the questions developed in advance?	☐
Do the types of questions vary?	☐
Has the same response type been used too frequently?	☐
High-Probability Requests	
Are the requests made in quick succession?	☐
Are the high and low probability requests of the same response type?	☐
Is the student able to complete the low probability request?	☐
Are the high probability requests highly preferred?	☐
Has the high probability task lost its effectiveness?	☐
Does the student become too frustrated or is unable to be redirected?	☐
Self-Monitoring of Attention	
Is the student able to complete the activity or is more instruction needed?	☐
Are external cues being delivered at random intervals?	☐
Is the student recording his behavior in response to the external cue?	☐
If cues have been faded, should they be reintroduced for a short period?	☐
Is the student recording of his behavior consistent with your observations?	☐
Praise	
Is the praise specific to a behavior rather than a general “good job”?	☐
Does the praise closely follow the appropriate task?	☐
Does the praise address a behavior that was previously difficult?	☐
Was the praise related to effort or skill rather than luck?	☐
For a complex behavior are successive close approximations praised?	☐
Was the praise delivered sincerely and with enthusiasm?	☐
Is the student responsive to the type of praise being used?	☐

Figure 2. Checklist to be used for self-evaluation of implementation of learning-related behavior strategies.

provide specific suggestions for improvement. For example, an instructor uses response cards to solicit feedback, but the questions are repetitive. An outside observer could keep track of the number and types of questions asked and realize that the instructor often asks very similar questions.

Frequent observations by an outside observer can be challenging to arrange in schools with limited resources and support personnel. In addition, an outside observer may alter the students’ and the instructor’s behavior in a manner that does not represent what typically occurs (Chafouleas, McDougal, Riley-Tillman, Panahon, & Hilt, 2005). An alternative could be the instructor completing a self-evaluation such as the checklist provided in Figure 2 to assess strategy implementation. If instructors have difficulty considering how they use the strategy while teaching, the session can be video recorded and analyzed later.

Momentary Time Sampling Observation

Student: _____ **Observer:**_____
Instructor:_____ **Start time:**_____
Date:_____ **End time:** _____

Definition of on-task behavior:

Directions: At the prompt, record (+) on-task or (0) off-task.

Seconds/ Minutes	0	15	30	45
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				
20				

Analysis:

# of on-task _____ = (ON)

(ON/80) x 100 = _____%

Comments about behaviors:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Figure 3. Momentary time-sampling form used by outside observer to evaluate a student's on-task behavior. The behavior is recorded as on-task (+) or off-task (0) every 15 seconds for 20 minutes.

Evaluating Strategy Effectiveness

To determine if the intervention is having a positive impact on student behavior, it is necessary to assess students' behavior prior to implementing an intervention and then regularly to monitor their progress. If an observer is available, behavior is evaluated using a momentary time-sampling procedure. Figure 3 includes an example of a momentary time-sampling record form for an individual student during reading group. The instructor operationally defines what it means for the student to be on-task during the small group instruction, such as following along in the text with his or her eyes and finger, answering questions, reading when called on, and looking at the speaker. Before implementing the use of specific group rules, such as with the SLANT strategy, the observer sits off to the side of the group and listens to an audio cue delivered through a headset. Every 15 seconds at the sound of the tone, the observer indicates with a plus (+) if the student was on-task according to the definition or a zero (0) if he or she was off-task.

At the end of the session, the percentage of on-task moments is calculated by dividing the number of pluses by the total number of tones heard. As shown in Figure 3, a 20-minute time frame with a tone every 15 seconds would have a total of 80 samples. After the intervention has been implemented, additional observations are made to determine if there was an increase in on-task behavior. Observing a student's peer at the same time is also useful to determine an appropriate level of on-task behavior that will serve as a goal for the student struggling with on-task behavior.

When an observation is not feasible, promising evaluation tools that are easily applied to a small group setting can be used including daily behavior report card (DBRC) and the daily behavior ratings (DBR). Instead of an outside observer recording a student's on-task behavior every 15 seconds, the instructor estimates at the end of the reading group about what percentage of the time the student was on-task. There are two ways to record this percentage. The DBRC uses a 6-point Likert-type scale to indicate a certain percentage of the time (Chafouleas et al., 2007). For example, a score of 0 corresponds not being on-task at any point, a score of 3 corresponds to being on-task about half of the time (41% to 60%), and a score of 5 corresponds to the student being on-task the majority of the time (81% to 100%). Each rating represents a large range, which makes it easy to score, but may not be sensitive enough to capture small increments of change. DBRs include a specific percentage (e.g., 72%) in three areas: academically engaged behavior, respectful behavior, and disruptive behavior (Chafouleas, 2011). A full range of percentage of time between 0% and 100% is used, which allows for smaller changes to be indicated (Chafouleas, 2011).

There are several things to consider when using these rating measures. First, the ratings cannot completely replace external direct observations when there is a concern about a student's behavior. Although there is a correlation between direct observations by another person and the instructor's ratings, it is not a perfect match (Chafouleas et al., 2005; Chafouleas et al., 2007). Instructors will need to compare their own ratings with that of an outside observer. At some point, instructors will need to carefully define the on-task behavior of a student to ensure that the evaluations are consistent over time (Chafouleas et al., 2007). Finally, results of the behavior ratings should be shared with the student so the student can see his or her improvement in light of the interventions. Overall, DBRCs and DBRs are easy ways to collect data about student behavior before and after an intervention has been implemented to help the instructor understand if the interventions are positively related to the student's behavior.

Conclusion

For students who are at risk for learning disabilities or behavior disabilities because of continued difficulty with reading and behavior, considering both academic and behavioral needs is necessary. Teaching appropriate learning-related behaviors such as following directions and staying on task helps students understand how to attend to instruction. In addition, the small group instructor will have more time to focus on the reading instruction instead of consistently redirecting students' off-task behaviors and having to repeat instruction. The focus on RTI frameworks and the increased use of small group academic instruction in the general education classroom for struggling learners provides a valuable opportunity not only to address academic concerns but also to build the necessary behaviors that facilitate learning.

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