

THE NON EFFECTS OF THE SOCIAL COMPETENCE INTERVENTION “WHY TRY” AND CONSEQUENCES WITH A STUDENT SEVERE BEHAVIOR DISORDERS AND HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM: A CASE REPORT

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Abstract: *(The purpose of this study was to implement a research-based social skills curriculum called WhyTry to decrease improper verbalizations made by an elementary student with high-functioning Autism. Other classroom interventions set up in conjunction with the social skills curriculum are contingent rewards in the form of chance tickets and the loss of privileges when the student refused to do his work. The effectiveness of the intervention was examined in an ABAB reversal design. Despite frequent academic success, students with high-functioning Autism tend to show deficits in social abilities such as an inability to interact with peers and an inability to monitor social cues. The WhyTry curriculum teaches social and emotional principles to youth in a way that empowers them to take control of their own behavior and choices. The part of the WhyTry curriculum used in this study is called the Word Board, which emphasis the use of thinking before acting or speaking. The results of this study indicate that the Word Board was effective in managing improper verbalizations in some aspects of the school environment, however further research is needed to determine the ability of the student to generalize his inappropriate behavior and interactions with peers.)*

Key Words: *ABAC reversal design, WhyTry Curriculum, Word Board, inappropriate verbalizations, high-functioning autism, positive procedures, response cost, recess*

Introduction

Social competence is defined as a multi-faceted skill consisting of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components that are needed for successful social adaptations (Severson & Walker, 2002). Social competency also reflects the ability to take another's perspective concerning a situation, learning from past experiences, and applying that learning to the changes in social interactions (Alberto & Troutman, 2012). Social competence is the foundation upon which expectations for future interaction with others is built. Students with high-functioning autism tend to have difficulty self-regulating their behavior, primarily pertaining to verbalizations with peers and in social environments such as the classroom (Heward, 2013). Students with high-functioning autism typically have the academic skills to mainstream into a regular education environment; however, their behavior and poor social skills can prevent them

from joining the regular education classroom. General education teachers do not want students in the class that constantly disrupt the instructional flow with continuous talk outs; therefore, appropriate social skills are imperative for students to learn, especially students with severe behavior disorders.

The use and removal of positive consequences have been employed with students to decrease their number of verbalizations (Champagne, Ike, McLaughlin, & Williams, 1990; Dietz & Repp, 1973, 1974, 1984). These consequences have ranged from teacher attention for the student engaging in an incompatible behavior as study (Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968) or reducing the number of inappropriate verbalizations required to earn a classroom reward (Dietz & Repp, 1973, 1974, 1984; Ike et al., 1990). Finally, these positive procedures (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007) have been widely employed in both elementary (Thomas et al., 1968) or secondary school classrooms (Ike et al., 1990). Montgomery, McLaughlin, and Griffin (2008) worked with a class of students with severe behavior disorders that included inappropriate talk-outs. Their goal was to reduce the number of talk outs made by the entire class. They implemented a group contingency system where if the class responded with two or less talk outs in a 55-minute class period, the whole class could earn an edible reward at the end of the period. The intervention was successful because it effectively reduced the number of inappropriate talk outs for the entire self-contained classroom and it was viewed positively by the students. More recently, Thompson, McLaughlin, and Derby (2011) implemented a reinforcement procedure with an elementary student with autism using a token system. They reduced the frequency of her inappropriate verbalizations across three different classroom configurations using differential reinforcement of lower rates of talking out or inappropriate verbalizations. The student and staff were pleased with the outcomes of the system and continue to implement the procedure in the classroom.

Review of Literature

Students with behavior disorders, such as autism, learn appropriate social skills when they are challenged to take responsibility for their own actions (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). If adults are always telling students what to do, they will not learn how to regulate their own behavior. A recent new social skills training (SST) curriculum called Why Try claims to teach students how to take responsibility for what they do and think about the consequences of their words and actions. The Why Try curriculum used in this study was developed to empower students to do the following: prevent bullying, improve decision making, prevent drop-outs, change behavior, improve academics, and prevent drug and alcohol use. The curriculum was created by Christian Moore. This program also makes use of the multiple intelligences literature (A) His program teaches key social and emotional skills that open the door to hope and empowerment for students who lack motivation. According to its website (www.whytry.com/), WhyTry is now used in thousands of schools, correctional facilities, and mental health agencies in the United States, Canada, and Australia and continues to be one of the fastest growing

intervention programs for at risk youth. The “Word Board” is one facet of the WhyTry curriculum that teaches students how to stop and think about the consequences of their actions and words. The “Word Board” also gives students the opportunity to take responsibility for their behavior choices. This aspect of the curriculum was chosen for the study because the student makes improper verbalizations and does not think about the consequences of his non-stop word choices. The Word Board provides the student an engaging, visual way to stop and think about his verbalizations and the consequences they might have on others.

This SST program employs multiple intelligences to motivate and create positive change that assists students achieve opportunity, freedom, and self-respect (Wymore, 2007). Over 10 visual analogies taught that are enriched by music, videos, journals, and team building games. Why Try uses a hands-on curriculum, which helps students overcome their issues and challenges. The program is said to reduce truancy, decrease problem behavior, and improve their academics. Baker (2008) reported that youth had significant increases in their perceived self-efficacy after completing the Why Try program. Eggett (2003) found that students were less likely to have attendance problems, have a less negative attitudes toward school and teachers, and took more responsibility for their own behavior and outcomes. There are testimonials at its website (<http://www.whytry.org>) but only a small amount of empirical evidence to support this SST program. At this writing there has been three dissertations regarding the use of WhyTry and two articles in the peer reviewed literature assessing WhyTry.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of the WhyTry elementary social skills curriculum to reduce the number of inappropriate verbalizations of a 4th grade autistic student with sever behavior problems in a self-contained behavior intervention classroom. At this time no data-based evaluations of WhyTry. Therefore, we wanted to provide a case report evaluating the WhyTry curriculum on the inappropriate verbalization for s single student with severe behavior disorders. Employing a structured case report using an ABAB reversal design should provide some initial evidence regarding the effectiveness of WhyTry or any classroom intervention procedure (Kazdin, 2010).

Methodology

Participant and Setting

The participant in this study was a fourth grade male student who attended an urban public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. The student qualifies for his Individualized Education Program for autism. He also was diagnosed with ADHD and Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) by a clinical psychologist and a local psychiatrist. The student received free/reduced breakfast and lunch, and he is permitted to takes home food every week to eat over the weekend. The student has reported that there is no water or electricity at his house. Child

Protective Services have clearly indicated that his mother regularly takes methamphetamines and marijuana. The student's behavior gets worse when his home life becomes more unstable. His primary behavior is improper verbalizations because this behavior disrupts the classroom and prevents the learning of all students in the classroom. The student talks out all of the time throughout the day. When he is angry or frustrated, his talk outs will be yelling and arguing; however, most of the time, the student simply walks around the room talking when he is supposed to be working quietly.

The setting for the research is a self-contained Behavior Intervention classroom located in a large urban school district in the Pacific Northwest. The classroom serves kindergarten through 6th grade students with emotional and behavior disorders. There are about 17 students in the room during the day, however, some mainstream out into regular education during the day. The classroom has two certified teachers, three instructional assistants, and one itinerate instructional assistant whose job is to take data on a particular student not related to the study. The researcher took data on the student's improper verbalizations over a one hour time period without the student's knowledge. This classroom has been involved in prior university and school district classroom research projects (Darrow, McLaughlin, Derby, & Johnson, 2012). The first author took data during literacy groups when the classroom was broken up into groups based on instructional level and all of the students were reading and writing. The researcher worked with the student one-on-one and took data on the transition into literacy, and during the literacy time in the morning. The study was conducted by the first author who was student teaching and completing a course as part of the certification and graduation requirements for a degree in special education (McLaughlin, B. Williams, R. Williams, Peck, Derby, Bjordahl, & Weber, 1999).

Materials

The researcher used a data recording sheet and pencil to record the number of talk outs. The student used the "Word Board" that comes in the WhyTry curriculum and green and red dry erase markers.



Figure 2: An example of the *Word Board* that was used in the intervention. The board the student used was laminated so that he could write on it with markers and it could be reused.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was the number of improper verbalizations. An improper verbalization was defined as any verbalization during classwork that was out of turn, without being called upon, or disruptive in nature to the rest of the class or teachers. Along with this, any yelling, shouting, swearing, or repeated use of a teacher or teacher's aide's name were considered as improper verbalizations. The participants were aware of the definitions of improper verbalizations throughout the course of the study.

Data Collection and Inter-Observer Agreement

Inter-observer agreement was taken on 50% of the sessions. During these sessions, the teacher's aide would take data independently, marking improper verbalizations on her own note card at her desk. Agreement was scored if the same number of verbalizations were marked. Any differences in the number of verbalizations within a session were considered disagreements. The number of agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements and multiplied by 100 to get the agreement percentage calculated agreement. The mean agreement score obtained was 92% with a range of 63 to 100%).

Experimental Design and Conditions

An ABAC reversal design (Barlow, Nock, & Hersen, 2008; Kazdin, 2011) was employed in this study. For Baseline, the number of talk outs was recorded made by the student in a one-hour time period. For intervention, the student practiced pro-social behavior using techniques employed by the *WhyTry* curriculum, he was rewarded for positive behavior choices, and he lost his privilege of going to lunch and recess when he refused to do his work during the last condition.

Baseline. Baseline data were taken twice and these outcomes were gathered by the first author without the participant's knowledge. The participant was observed, and any improper verbalization was marked with a tally mark. No specific attention was given for improper verbalizations. A return baseline when the researcher took away the *Talk Board* and dry erase markers from the participant and did not give him any prompts or redirects to think before he spoke or to work quietly. The second baseline was in effect for two sessions.

WhyTry social skills intervention + chance tickets. The *WhyTry* curriculum was used in conjunction with contingent praise and rewards to intervene on the student's behavior. The *WhyTry* program aims to teach students decision making strategies, ways to deal with peer pressure, and how to act respectfully and honestly. The program empowers students to take responsibility for their actions and teaches students why it is important to make the better, more difficult choices for positive behavior. The part of the program used in the study is called the "Word Board." The researcher gave the student the board along with green and red dry erase markers. The researcher discussed with the student how his words have consequences (for example: saying "I will blow up this school" will have consequences) and emphasized the

importance of thinking before speaking. The first author told the student that when he feels like talking, he should instead write his thoughts on the “Word Board” and then decide if they are appropriate. The student was given green markers to write neutral thoughts that he has, and red markers to write angry thoughts.

In the classroom, students earn chance tickets for making good choices throughout the day. These tickets are put in a jar and were drawn out so the student would earn positive rewards. The student received chance tickets for working quietly and making the choice not to talk out in class. The first author continued to take data on the student’s number of talk outs during the one-hour time period. Mastery was defined as two talk outs or less in one-hour. The student was prompted to use his “Word Board” and raise his hand if he wanted to speak, as well as rewarded for positive behavior and quiet, independent work.

WhyTry intervention.+ chance tickets+ lose recess + lose lunch and recess. Because the student was talking out to escape writing assignments, he was told that he would not be allowed to go to recess and he would eat lunch in the classroom if he continued to talk out and refuse to work. When the student talked out and refused to do his work all morning, an instructional assistant would go get his lunch for him and bring it back to the classroom for the student to eat. After eating his lunch, the student would stay in from recess and finish the writing that he was assigned from the morning literacy group.

Findings

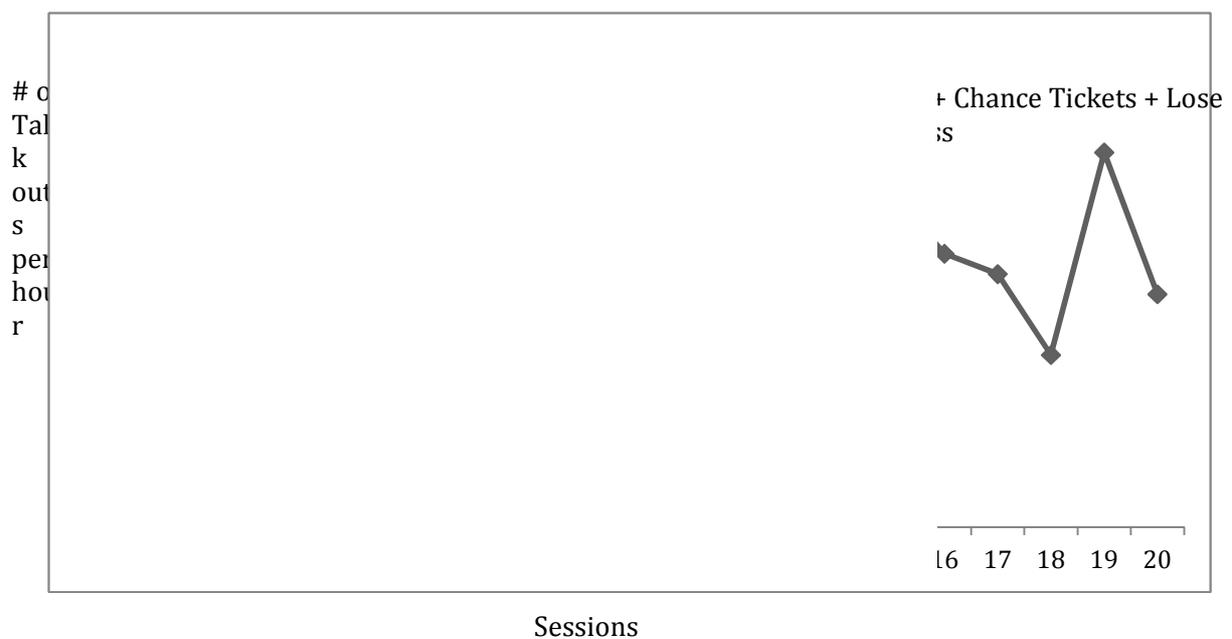


Figure 1. Graph of the number of inappropriate verbalizations made by the student in one hour during the two baselines as well as the WhyTry procedures.

The amount of talk outs per hour is shown in Figure 1. Our participant averaged 32 talk outs per hour (range 27 to 38 talk outs) during baseline. His average number of talk outs decreased to 22 talk outs (range during the *WhyTry* word board+ chance ticket intervention. During the return baseline, his talk outs increased slightly ($M = 32$ talk outs). During the last word board+ chance tickets+ lose lunch and recess intervention he averaged 28 talk outs per hour.

Conclusion

The *Why Try* curriculum (Moore, 2008), contingent rewards, and loss of privileges of lunch and recess was not effective for the student because there are home environment issues that deeply affect the student's behavior. The student has been in and out of foster care, been sexually abused, and is currently neglected and without running water or electricity through the winter. His home life is so unstable and detrimental to his well-being that he needs care and counseling beyond school district curriculums. If the research had been continued throughout the year, the student might have shown more progress; however he was removed from the home by Child Protective Services half way through the study.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The intervention and its various components were viewed as a way to increase a socially important pro-social behavior and as a manner to teaching a student taking responsibility for one's actions are necessary life skills. If the first author had had more time with the student, a more effective intervention might have been found to work with our student. Taking away lunch and recess privileges did not work at all for the student, and if the study was done again, the researcher would have used a more positive intervention, such as earning points in order to earn a new book (something the student enjoys).

It should be noted that the student enjoyed writing on the "Word Board" for a few days, but he lost interest quickly and would not remember to use it. The student liked earning chance tickets; however they were not reinforcing enough to change his behavior. As stated earlier, the student's home environment was too influential on the student's behavior that school activities and district curriculums were not going to make an impact in just a few months. For future behavior interventions to work for this student, we recommend mental health counseling and a stable, consistent, supportive home environment.

Unfortunately, we were able to change our participant's targeted social deficit talking out in class. There were several different issues related to this student that were out of the control of the classroom staff. The lack of a clear functional relationship puts the WhyTry curriculum as a

classroom social skills training program at some risk. Even with the evidence from unpublished doctoral dissertations (Baker, 2008; Wilhite, 2010) and a report in the peer reviewed literature (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2009), clearly more research and evidence is needed before WhyTry is recommended. The program is quite expensive for a school or classroom (just under \$2000.00), so clearly more evidence is needed to recommend this program. Clearly research with small groups as well as individuals is needed. This should occur before a school system spends a great deal of money on this social skills training program. As Bullis, Walker, and Sprague (2001) have lamented, the evidence of effectiveness remains illusive. However, in fairness to the Why Try program, we were unsuccessful with a very difficult student and clearly more research is suggested with Why Try with and without consequences. .

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