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Review Article

# Effective Classroom Management to Support Elementary Students: Promoting Student Success through Reducing Off-Task Problem Behaviors

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## Abstract

Identifying effective classroom management strategies is important to support teachers in promoting environments conducive to learning. Effective classroom management has been demonstrated to be associated with student achievement, motivation, and fewer challenging behaviors. Given the benefits of effective classroom management strategies and providing students with self-regulation skills, the present study examined the effectiveness of a contemporary classroom behavioral management strategy in reducing off-task problem behaviors. The Raising Lions method of behavior management emphasizes:

- i. Immediate action responses from teachers,
- ii. Encourages a positive or neutral tone of voice, and
- iii. Allocates brief prompts for students that allow them the opportunity to exercise self-control and re-engage in classroom instruction without teacher judgment.

Employing a pre-post-follow-up design, the present study examined implementation fidelity and the effectiveness of this classroom management strategy in reducing the number of off-task problem behaviors in elementary school classrooms. Classroom observations were conducted in all 18 classrooms (school-wide, including transition kindergarten through Grade 6 classrooms), with a population of primarily Latino students. One-way ANOVAs compared off-task behaviors across pre and post-intervention stages. Overall, results revealed statistically significant decreases in the number of off-task problem behaviors in 16 of the 18 classrooms. The largest impact was related to teachers not naming the behavior and instead giving a brief action prompt to trigger self-reflection and self-correction. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

## Key Points

We currently know: 1) off-task classroom disruptions are frequently impact many classrooms, 2) off-task classroom disruptions are associated with poorer academic and social competence among elementary school-age children, and 3) systematic reviews reveal key considerations in implementing classroom management strategies, however, few studies examine outcomes associated with systematic implementation strategies. This paper contributes: 1) an evaluation of a systematic school-wide implementation of classroom management strategies to facilitate student engagement, on-task behaviors, and teacher-student relationships; 2) information about successful implementation, including professional development, and consultation; and 3) initial evidence revealing the positive outcomes associated with these systematic classroom management methods. Notably, this study found that teachers not naming the behavior and instead giving a brief action prompt to trigger self-reflection, was associated with a decrease in off-task classroom behaviors.

Effective classroom management predicts student achievement and motivation [1-3]. Behavior management frequently consumes a significant portion of class time, resulting in a substantial loss of instructional time and lower academic achievement [4,5]. Research consistently reveals the benefits of effective classroom management [4-8]. There has been increasing emphasis of the importance of developing, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating scholarship that informs the use of interventions with culturally and linguistically diverse learners [9-13]. The following provides a brief review of evidence-based classroom management strategies, overview of the methods used in this study, then a summary of the analyses, results, and discussion of the findings.

## Classroom Management

Establishing a classroom environment that focuses on encouragement and support positively influences students' motivation and academic success [4,14,15]. Garwood, et al. [7] found that effective classroom management in early school years predicted higher achievement. Effective and proactive classroom management strategies featuring increases in teacher praise and decreases in teacher reprimands are found to be positively associated with improvements in the rate of on-task behavior at both class-wide and individual student levels [15]. Additionally, classrooms that promote encouragement and support are associated with increased motivation, adjustment, and academic achievement [4]. These relationships demonstrate the significant influence teachers have on students' motivation and involvement. Research reveals that authoritarian discipline is less effective in long-term prevention of negative behaviors compared to more positive methods [16-20]. To continue to encourage the use of alternative methods over punitive measures, further research and resources for teachers to use in response to disruptive classroom behaviors that utilize supportive methods of discipline is necessary. Developing interventions that are effective in reducing future occurrences of challenging behaviors, non-exclusionary, and maintain the overall positive climate of the classroom can work to further benefit the overall effectiveness of the



classroom. Given the benefits of successful classroom management strategies and providing students with self-regulation skills, this study examined the effectiveness of a contemporary behavioral management method in reducing problem behaviors within the classroom.

## Behavioral Management Method

The Raising Lions classroom behavioral management method [21] emphasizes: immediate action responses from teachers, a positive or neutral tone of voice, avoiding a verbal identification of the off-task behavior, and prompts that provide students the opportunity to exercise self-management and re-engage in classroom instruction without teacher judgment. This method begins with the use of immediate prompt (i.e., prompting a break in the classroom for 1 minute) rather than delayed consequences (e.g., losing recess time, sending to the principal's office). By responding with an immediate prompt, the behavior is addressed, and the student can resume without losing future preferred activities, which could diminish motivation to improve the behavior. Rather than teachers judging, explaining, and correcting in their communications, instead, the teacher's prompt promotes the opportunity for the student to engage in self-reflection and self-management, therefore, facilitating agency in the child in adapting to classroom behavior expectations. Wentzel [22] explains that promoting a caring environment in the classroom is instrumental in motivating students to engage in prosocial behavior. Wentzel [22] further explains that this environment can be created by consistently reinforcing rules, promoting self-control, and providing positive interactions between student and teacher. The rationale for giving students a "brief break" when they are off-task is that this affords the student an opportunity to exercise self-control, reflection, and regulation. Research supports the potential effectiveness of this strategy in that it creates space for the student to practice their own self-regulation, similar to mindfulness-based practices, which have been effective in reducing disruptive behaviors in school [23-27].

The use of a positive or neutral tone communicates a caring response to the student and the prompt to self-reflect is an effect of their behavior, rather than a response that is communicating the judgment, explanation, and often emotions from the teacher. This approach is consistent with recommendations to use a neutral tone when addressing disruptive behavior [28-31]. When the student are prompted to take a brief break and self-reflect immediately following their off-task behavior, they receive feedback and are given the opportunity to make better choices without their previous choice being held against them. If soon after returning from their self-reflection they make a second offense, their next self-reflection break is slightly longer (e.g., 2 minutes), and so forth. Allowing the student an opportunity to practice self-regulation can be effective in sustained progress in reducing future behaviors, particularly as it relates to the student utilizing mindfulness-based strategies to reduce stress and return to the desired task [32]. This method communicates to the student that the adult trusts they know what is expected of them and they can correct their own behavior. The student is given independence to make choices and receive predictable prompts for self-reflection, allowing them space to develop skills related to decision making and responsibility.

## Present study

Given that the Raising Lions [21] behavior management method has not previously been evaluated, the present study is the first to examine the method in classroom settings to reduce the number of off-task problem behaviors. It was hypothesized that the classrooms implementing the Raising Lions method would yield a significant decrease in the number of off-task behaviors among students.

## Methods

### Participants

The Raising Lions method [21] was implemented in an elementary school on the central coast of California, and included all eighteen classrooms/teachers (transitional kindergarten-6<sup>th</sup> grade, special education, art, and music classes) and 372 students. Of these students, 52% were male, 94% were Hispanic/Latino, 63% were from low socioeconomic status homes, and 79% were classified as English language learners. All teachers and students at the school participated.

### Procedures

Teachers read the Raising Lions book [21] and received two professional development sessions to learn how to effectively implement the method and establish

classroom policies. This professional development is important to ensure the appropriate use of the method, and help to ensure that the method was used safely and effectively to reduce off-task behavior [33]. At the classroom level, teachers provided all students with information and direction regarding self-regulation, self-management, self-regulation, and mindfulness, and also described the process of a brief prompt following by these activities as the method that would be used if student behaviors were disruptive to the classroom learning. Teachers established specific stations in the classroom for students to take the time for self-reflection, consisting of a desk and a timer away from main classroom activities. When a student was engaging in disruptive behavior the teacher was to use a neutral or positive tone of voice and direct the student to take a brief one-minute break, so they may engage in self-reflection, and then simply return to their task when completed. If the student repeated the disruptive behavior, teachers would ask the student to take another break each with increasing duration of one minute to allow for further self-reflection and encourage agency through self-control and self-management. If it became apparent that the student was utilizing the strategy to avoid work, the teacher was to coordinate a time for the student to make up the work missed by taking extended or repeat breaks. Teachers who requested additional guidance were provided with in-class consultation consisting of immediate feedback on method use and modeling of implementation strategies.

The implementation of the procedures of the method are consistent with a responsive classroom approach, wherein such "breaks" are designed and implemented as "a positive, respectful, and supportive teaching strategy used to help a child who is just beginning to lose self-control to regain it so they can do their best learning" [34]. Professional development, preparation, and implementation of these breaks was consistent with responsive classroom [34] guidelines, including: proactively teaching expected behaviors, explaining the purpose of the break in advance to all students, choosing a safe and visible space, and describing the break method to help students regain focus and control while on a brief break and then rejoining the activity quietly. Research assistants were trained in classroom observation procedures. To reduce bias in observation procedures, the purpose of the study and professional development the teachers received were not known to the research assistants.

### Data collection

Data was collected across three phases. First, to establish a baseline for comparing student off-task behaviors in each classroom, the initial data collection took place during the month before teachers received training. The second phase of data collection, occurred for a one-month period after the training was provided, which measured the initial post-intervention effects on student off-task behaviors and implementation fidelity in each classroom. The final follow-up data collection phase, six months later, was used to evaluate sustained implementation fidelity and effects on student off-task behaviors in each classroom. On average, the classroom observation period was 30 minutes, recording the data every 3 minutes. A total of 3,892 observations were recorded across the classrooms.

### Measures

Classroom observers systematically recorded the number of students off-task and what type of off-task behavior they were engaging in (i.e., passive, disruptive, group disruption, oppositional, verbal aggression, physical aggression), the teacher's response to the off-task behavior (i.e., directive, corrective, action, unaware, ignore), teachers tone of voice, and the length of time to resolve the issue. During the three data collection periods (i.e., baseline, post-intervention, and follow-up six research assistants spent an average of thirty minutes in each classroom twice a week). Classroom observations took place in all eighteen classrooms.

**Inter-rater reliability:** Inter-rater reliability was examined by placing two observers in the same classroom and examining the correlation between the two for off-task behaviors, teacher responses, and tone of voice. Interpretations from these calculations were based on the recommendations of Cicchetti [35], with correlation values of less than .40 indicating poor consistency, fair between .40 and .59, good between .60 and .74, and excellent between .75 and 1. Overall off-task behaviors had an inter-rater consistency coefficient of .78 (passive=.67, disruptive=.89, group disruptive=.86, oppositional=.81). Tone of voice had an inter-rater consistency coefficient of .72. Use of action responses had an inter-rater consistency coefficient of .83. Thus, the inter-rater reliability was in the good to excellent range across all items.

**Implementation fidelity:** As described above, each component of the Raising Lions method was observed and documented following each off-task behavior in



each classroom. Analyses of implementation fidelity data illustrated an increase in implementation from pre to post and follow-up for most of the classrooms (as illustrated in the Action Response percentage in (Table 1).

**Off-task problem behaviors:** The observers used the following criteria to record each time a student was off-task:

- a) Passive-Off-task but not disruptive to another student or students (e.g., staring out the window, drawing, folding paper).
- b) Disruptive-Off-task and disruptive to another student or students (e.g., talking about topics not related to an assigned task, fidgeting with shared materials, taking objects from a peer).
- c) Group disruption-Off-task and disruptive to class (e.g., disruptive audible sounds such as whistling, humming, walking around the room, speaking loudly without permission).
- d) Oppositional-Off-task and in conflict with teacher (e.g., uncooperative comments or actions, combative comments or actions, not responding to redirection from teacher).
- e) Verbal aggression-Audible verbalizations that are aggressive toward others (e.g., comments that are mean, pejorative, hurtful).
- f) Physical aggression-Physical behaviors that are aggressive toward others (e.g., kicking, hitting, pushing, throwing objects at others).

Observers recorded off-task behaviors as they occurred until one of two criteria emerged. Either the timer reached ninety seconds, or the teacher responded to the off-task behavior. If no students were off task, a score of zero was entered for each option.

**Teacher responses:** Observers also recorded what response, if any, was given to the student engaged in the off-task behavior. Teacher responses to off-task behavior were recorded as follows:

- a) Directive Information: Teacher identifies the desired behavior that she isn't seeing.
- b) Corrective Information: Teacher identifies the problem behavior she wants to stop.
- c) Action: Teacher gives a brief action-prompt (i.e., take a brief break to self-reflect)
- d) Stops talking and waits for attention.
- e) Ignores behavior

Once a teacher response was logged, the teacher's tone of voice was noted following any verbal prompts made to the student. These were marked as: negative (you could tell the teacher was upset), neutral (no emotion could be detected from the teacher's tone of voice), or positive (the teacher's voice conveyed a tone of support). If the teacher administered an action response, additional elements were documented:

Did the teacher discuss the behavior with the student or avoid identifying the behavior and was the prompt or consequence immediate or delayed.

### Data analyses

Data analyses used IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Univariate analyses examined the mean number of off-task behaviors per instance and the percentage of time a teacher used an action response when a student was off-task. All off-task behaviors were summed, creating a per instance total of off-task behaviors.

**Examining off-task problem behaviors:** One-way ANOVAs with Bonferroni post hoc analyses were used to examine whether mean off-task behaviors differed across intervention periods. Off-task behaviors served as the dependent variable with the intervention period (i.e., baseline pre-intervention, post 1, and post 2) as the grouping variable. Analyses were conducted at the school-wide level, as well as for individual classrooms. Statistical significance was examined using a value of  $p < .05$  for all analyses.

### Results

Across classrooms, the results revealed a significant reduction in the number of off-task problem behaviors following the implementation of the Raising Lions method ( $F(2,3892)=172.20, P<.001$ ) and had a medium effect size of  $r=.32$  from pre-intervention to the second phase of evaluation. See (Table 2) for ANOVA results. Overall, sixteen of the eighteen classrooms each demonstrated a significant decrease in off-task behaviors from baseline to the post implementation period. Fifteen of the classes revealed a significant decrease in off-task behaviors from the baseline phase to the first post implementation phase. Eleven classes revealed a significant decrease in off-task behaviors across both time periods. Of these 11 classes, nine demonstrated an increase in the use of action responses. Four classrooms yielded a significant decrease in off-task behaviors from the pre-intervention stage in the first period, but not the second. Of these, there was a decrease in the use of action responses in the second period following the first in three of the classes. One class revealed a significant decrease in off-task behaviors from the pre-intervention stage in the second period but not the first. Two classes did have a decrease in off-task behaviors, however not a significant decrease, nor was there a notable change in the use of action responses. See (Table 1) for a classroom level summary of usage of action responses and off-task behaviors.

**Table 1:** School-wide ANOVA results comparing off-task behaviors from pre to post implementation.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1426.866	2	713.433	172.197	0
Within Groups	16116.767	3890	4.143		
Total	17543.633	3892			

**Table 2:** Classroom level summary of behaviors and action responses for each classroom.

Classroom	Time 1			Time 2			Time 3		
	AR%	Behaviors	SD	AR%	Behaviors	SD	AR%	Behaviors	SD
1	10	3.25	1.86	31	1.77*	1.48	13	2.53	2.04
2	3	2.33	1.6	4	1.1**	1.18	37	1.04**	1.11
3	15	1.88	1.37	15	1.37**	1.14	77	1.12	0.78
4	15	2.03	1.63	11	1.76	1.11	12	1.68	1.53
5	2	1.91	1.92	4	1.06**	1.05	0	1.21	1.05
6	1	2.42	2.21	3	1.53*	1.35	0	1.38**	2.18
7	10	3.98	3.07	15	1.8**	1.19	36	1.76**	1.4
8	9	1.66	1.66	11	1.03**	1.15	19	0.92**	1.01
9	1	2	1.51	12	3.5	2.44	0	0.97**	0.95
10	3	3.29	2.19	5	2.55*	1.55	0	0.67**	1.23
11	6	3.37	2.25	5	1.73**	2.29	14	2.17*	1.77
12	2	1.43	1.52	14	0.78*	0.92	53	0.63**	0.91
13	2	3.27	2.78	2	2.06**	2.03	25	0.47**	1.15



14	20	5.34	3.24	24	2.48**	1.86	23	2**	1.3
15	3	3.54	3.08	6	1.88**	2.58	60	0.32**	0.58
16	2	0.5	0.51	6	0.51	0.58	3	0.23	0.43
17	6	1.12	1.32	11	0.72*	1.05	7	1.43	1.33
18	6	3.92	2.99	6	1.65**	2.07	23	1.78**	2.37

**Source:** \*Indicates significance at  $P < .05$  and \*\*Indicate significance at  $P < .01$ . Changes in off-task behaviors were evaluated based on differences between time one, or pre-intervention, to time two, then from time two to time three to evaluate sustainable effects.

AR%=Percentage of teacher's actions that were coded as action response.

Behaviors=Mean of off-task behaviors per instance.

## Discussion

The present study examined the implementation and effectiveness of the Raising Lions behavior management method [21] in reducing the number of off-task problem behaviors among Latino students in elementary school classrooms. The findings from the current study provide preliminary evidence revealing the association between the raising lions method and reducing the number of off-task problem behaviors. These findings are consistent with existing literature supporting disciplinary techniques that encourage inclusivity policies and supportive environments [4,14-16], as the students remain in the classroom, and given the brevity of the opportunity for self-reflection, they are not excluded from the classroom activities or learning opportunities. The Raising Lions method focuses on providing the student opportunities to develop self-regulation skills and allow them to make better decisions regarding their behaviors without previous actions held against them. Raising Lions [21], emphasizes that with consistent prompts and self-reflection, children gain autonomy over their actions. As the child becomes familiar with the expectations and prompts for their behavior, they become more responsible for their behavior and can establish autonomy and self-regulation. Furthermore, as Newman [21] explains, children often know what is expected of them and when they are violating these expectations. This method communicates to the students that the adult trusts that they know the right choices to make and their ability to self-correct.

Further, the Raising Lions method is consistent with existing research explaining that positive teacher and student interactions are positively correlated with establishing supportive learning environments [4,36]. Specifically, the Raising Lions method emphasizes the removal of judgment and emotion from the response, thus, promoting more positive communications and relationships between the teacher and the student. Because children are still developing these skills, they require support from adults through this learning process. Based on the extant literature delineating multiple influences contribute to a student's disruptive behavior Farmer et al. (2010) [37,38] the teacher can acknowledge those influences by creating a space for the student to exercise self-control and responsible decision making without placing blame on the child. In the Raising Lions method, teachers were taught to use brief prompts to signal children to self-correct, rather than teachers correcting students. The effect of this shift was that children were more willing to self-correct than they were willing to accept correction and off-task behaviors dropped 49%. The most drastic improvements were present the less teachers named the behaviors. We anticipate this was because this prompt for self-reflection and self-management allowed children to autonomously realize/correct it themselves. By giving a clear action direction while actively removing any judgment, information and explanation, the child is free to change their mind and behavior, and develop the habit of self-prompting.

This study provides teachers and staff with a behavioral management technique that can be implemented at the universal level and potentially lead to benefits within various classroom settings. Farmer [2] highlight that professional development and consultation are key aspects in the successful implementation of interventions. Mendenhall [39] further support the importance of continuous professional development to enact positive changes to teachers' beliefs and practices. This study supports existing research emphasizing the need for teacher support when implementing universal level interventions [38,39]. Teachers received group level instruction followed by supplemental consultation, as requested. These sources of teacher support aid in the implementation fidelity and overall effectiveness of the intervention across time [6,40,41]. As discussed by Ryan, et al. [33], the use of "time-outs" or "breaks" in education is common, takes many forms (e.g., exclusionary, isolation, seclusion, nonexclusion, restrictive), and in some instances are used inappropriately. Our experiences and lessons learned are consistent with the recommendations of Ryan and colleagues, highlighting that teachers should; develop classroom infrastructures and relationships with the students that are reinforcing, develop hierarchical behavioral

management plans that include universal as well as individual considerations, collect and use data to inform decisions, establish clear classroom management policies, and recognize that classroom management procedures are only one component of comprehensive behavioral supports for students offered at school [42-44].

## Limitations & Future Directions

For some classes the use of action responses is relatively low, however, students did demonstrate a significant decrease in the number of off-task behaviors. In this study, all teachers were invited to implement the Raising Lions method (no random assignment), so these decisions were at the discretion of the teachers, thus, there was no control comparison group. Further research employing a randomized control trial design may be valuable to further examine both implementation and associated outcomes. There are some contextual considerations before implementing Raising Lions. Some teachers reported challenges in giving breaks to all students who warranted one at the same moment. Before implementing this method, schools will benefit from establishing location and personnel responsible for managing students in need of extended breaks in the first weeks following implementation when the usage of breaks is more frequent. This study was carried out in one elementary school in central California, with a population of primarily Latino students, so results may differ across grade levels, geographic regions, and school culture. While we anticipate the findings regarding effectiveness of the method would be similar for Black, White, Asian, and other populations of children, further study is needed to generalize the findings to other student populations. The Raising Lions method should also be examined with other grade levels and alternative school settings. Finally, the ability of others administering the training and support for teachers should be evaluated to determine the generalizability of the current findings.

## In Sum

This study provides preliminary support for the effectiveness of the key components featured in the raising lions classroom management method to address challenging behaviors and increase on-task behaviors. The study also contributes to knowledge regarding implementation of classroom management methods to support the success of Latino students. While additional research is needed to support generalizability of these findings, the Raising Lions method warrants further consideration as an effective strategy in reducing problem behaviors in elementary school classrooms.

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